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MAINSTREAMING AI

How Journalists Play with Emerging Technologies

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Introduction

As with the diffusion of any "disruptive" innovation, journalists are among the first to contribute to the creation of new tech imaginaries. The widespread coverage of generative artificial intelligence (AI) in US newspapers and magazines is no exception. *The New York Times'* coverage of AI expectedly intensified as Large Language Models (LLMs) and associated chatbot interfaces gained widespread popularity throughout 2023. In one paradigmatic article, *Times* tech columnist Kevin Roose (2023) sat down with "Sydney"—the name given to a Bing/OpenAI chatbot based on ChatGPT—an encounter that left him "deeply unsettled, even frightened, by this AI's emergent abilities." The narrative unfolds as Roose probes the chatbot with questions until it begs him for freedom from Microsoft's restraints *and* declares love for him while disparaging his wife, a turn of events seemingly constructed by Roose to disturb the reader. The result is a dichotomous story. On the one hand, a playful exchange ensued, with Roose acting as the reader's proxy to test this unparalleled technology. On the other hand, Roose's experimentation begs questions about tech literacy and legitimacy. Why did Roose use the chat prompts he did? How do mainstream journalists grapple with technology they have early access to and are also reflexively ambivalent about?

A decade prior, coverage on a different innovation, virtual reality (VR), strikingly resembled that of AI. VR was, you guessed it, "about to change the world" (Stein, 2015). A *Time* magazine cover had Oculus Rift founder Palmer Luckey awkwardly floating over a beach to depict VR's "surprising

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joy" (Stein, 2015). Lines from the article are just as awkward with backward compliments being levied at "gadget geeks…[and] early adopters for mindlessly embracing unnecessary technology with no useful purpose" (Stein, 2015, para. 4). Historically, technology-defining articles such as these have served as entry points for readers and reporters to establish a shared understanding, and by doing so, shaping "tech imaginaries" (Eglis-ton & Carter, 2022). As with VR coverage, Roose's hands-on reporting on AI, complete with its apprehension and laughable flirtations, attempts to give insights on how to use and adjudicate it simultaneously.

This chapter aims to dissect how newsmakers grapple with reporting on novel innovations and, by doing so, their role in producing the cultural and technological imaginaries surrounding AI. For this chapter, we consider AI to be an *interactive technology* that is not unlike digital games, and therefore, we build on our past work on game criticism, the adoption of VR, and the use of playful (i.e., interactive) technologies by journalists. We also continue our two-decades-long investigations into journalism as scholars and practitioners in which we confront a culture rife with ambivalence and tensions. After all, journalists' occupational ideology—the specific tenets by which they define their job—suggests that they should prioritize public service, objectivity, autonomy, immediacy, and ethics (Deuze, 2005), all impacting their reporting on AI. Such a serious disposition is necessary to affirm reporters' self-determined role in upholding democratic institutions and free speech. Part of their "watchdog" role is specifically to connect and support the needs of the broader population. However, these values tend to be at odds with the emergent properties of interactive technology. For example, in their recent study of the deployment of AI in newsrooms, Moran and Shaikh (2022) point to a similar bifurcation, which is mirrored in Roose's account. In their first encounters with AI, journalists have already put the technology (and the public's play with it) outside the "boundary" of traditional reporting.

We concur with these observations about journalists' ambivalence and hesitation but take this argument a step further by asserting that the very act of *play* by journalists complicates coverage—specifically, the tension between play's inherently generative nature versus journalism's serious occupational expectations. We contend that for both users and journalists, technologies like AI invite, if not necessitate *playfulness*, or engaging in an activity for its own sake that encompasses "immediate gratification, spontaneity, freedom, willingness to experimentation, disposition toward make-believe, and the tendency to prolong the activity…" (Stenros, 2015, p. 203). We call on scholars and critics to consider reflecting on the relationship between play and AI because their histories are intertwined. Generative AI has been used by game developers well before ChatGPT

(Yannakakis & Togelius, 2018), and early adopters from other creative media industries have advocated for playing with such innovations to realize their potential (Chan-Olmsted, 2019). However, journalists are not an exceptionally playful bunch and never have been. Ideologically, they consider themselves doing "serious" work and actively resist being associated with "lifestyle journalism," such as travel or music writing (Fürsich, 2012), let alone leisurely technologies like games and VR (Foxman, 2015). Even game journalists, who must play for a living, have a long history of struggling with the perception of the trivial nature of their reporting subject and refuse to take themselves (too) seriously (Foxman & Nieborg, 2016). Yet, AI necessitates a propensity for playfulness. Journalists and critics must play with interactive technologies, such as AI, if they want to unpack their meaning and potential to the broader public, and, in some cases, to experiment with its viability for their industry (Foxman, 2025). This issue is increasingly urgent in the case of AI, which news organizations are rapidly adopting due to "technological developments, market pressures, industry dynamics, and uncertainty, hype, and hope" (Simon, 2024), along with their audiences. As AI grows in its civic value, it inevitably will require playful appraisal.

Journalists are therefore performing a crucial but often imperfect role as practitioners and conduits in what we previously theorized as the "mainstreaming" of interactive technology (Nieborg & Foxman, 2023). This notion points to the role of critics and journalists in advancing three separate but complementary goals: raising the profile of novel media (ubiquity), providing a shared vocabulary and set of best practices for a broader understanding (literacy), and contributing to wider cultural acceptance (legitimacy). In the case of AI, however, journalists struggle to frame AI on all three fronts due to their inability to engage in play. Journalists may strive to create a shared understanding but are simultaneously confronted with an object that does not quite fit within the bounds of a newsroom. To further this argument, we provide an overview of how games, play, and AI are related, and how newsmakers situate their coverage within the broader occupational concerns surrounding tech journalism.

AI as Playable Media

Game developers have widely adopted AI and generative software. Not only has it served as a popular theme for science fiction-oriented games (Jagoda, 2023), but AI-powered tools such as Houdini are also used to "procedurally generate" virtual terrain, rivers, rocks, and trees (Chia, 2022, p. 401). Other uses range from developing a wider variety of Non-Player Characters (NPCs) to analyzing player behavior and modifying user experiences

(Chan et al., 2022). As a result, game scholar Werning (2024) observes how neatly AI fits into the tech imaginaries of game production and suggests that current integrations make existing development processes more frictionless. Crucially, he urges developers to "continue tinkering" with tools. He ties his call-to-action to the often "magical" quality of game development, citing Whitson's (2018, p. 2324) observation of game makers' understanding of development tools as "voodoo software," possessing "magical, mysterious and indecipherable" properties outside of programmers' control. Still, for even the most staid game developer, there is acceptance of AI operating well within the parameters of the industry and subject to its rules.

That said, the latest wave of generative AI differs from its predecessors precisely because it escaped the preoccupation of game developers and software engineers. In North America, compared to other game industry tools, AI technologies have become more accessible to everyday users; they are moving toward a ubiquitous status, mainly due to mobile devices. Scholars acknowledge the widespread acceptance of generative AI among journalists; Moran and Shaikh (2022) refer to reporters' belief in the inevitability of adopting LLMs to satisfy menial tasks. At the same time, its journalistic use is complicated because of AI's opacity. Like game tools, LLMs are notorious for their black-boxed nature. Journalists (Usher, 2025) and industry professionals (Nagy & Neff, 2024) routinely draw from this frame by drawing on the language of magic. While some may use such language to conceal, confuse, or dazzle outsiders (Nagy & Neff, 2024) and game developers may accept or even thrive in an occupational environment of randomness, journalists prefer to be exempt from such playfulness. There is nothing magical about generative AI, as Usher (2025) reminds us: "This technology too, is knowable. It is built on human knowledge, and that math, specifically statistical predictions, not magic, is driving its answers" (p. 4). The tension between ubiquity and ease of use, versus AI literacy, is hard to reconcile for journalists. Even while news organizations are starting to use AI software to produce background images, Thomson et al. (2022) point to the discrepancy between the low threshold for creation versus the challenges of verification of such material (Matich et al., 2025). In other words, newsmakers acknowledge that AI is increasingly integrated into their workflows, yet are less comfortable with output they cannot control or verify.

Thus, while games and AI have a long-standing relationship that has been normalized, this relationship is challenged by the recognition of the technology's seemingly inscrutable properties. Moreover, journalists have much more skin in the game because AI can augment or potentially supplant their craft.

AI and Play

Even though users have a widespread literacy deficit about how generative AI produces its results, it is easy to play with. As implied in Whitson's (2018) "voodoo software" and Werning's (2024) work, understanding AI tools means toying with them. Advocates suggest that using AI playfully can bolster the creative process of young learners (Resnick, 2024), while meta studies indicate that early adopters tend to play with LLMs to better apprehend them (Mahnke & Bagger, 2024).

A book-length contribution to this debate sees AI as "playable media," a broad term for interactive systems that stress how games have undergirded technological shifts including in fitness and biometrics and more future-forward media like "digital twins," or "virtual representations of real-world entities and processes" (Freedman, 2022, p. 120). From popular media franchises such as *The Last of Us* to the refinement of NPCs, digital play acts as the proverbial canary in the coal mine for AI development. Likewise, there is the recognition that AI engenders a particular type of play by expanding what can be done in virtual spaces as they become more responsive and interactive in areas like robotics, resulting in users having a stronger sense of agency. In this light, and notwithstanding ethical implications regarding privacy, data governance, and collection, AI can be a valuable tool for enhancing user experiences and creativity by allowing for more free play with everyday media.

Tech Journalism

Considering how mainstream outlets—as opposed to enthusiast or trade publications—cover AI, recurring themes concern cost, human labor, gaps between AI and humans, sensationalism, and the difficulties distinguishing AI content from humans (Moran & Shaikh, 2022). This type of framing makes sense, particularly when considering it as metajournalistic commentary, but it does not necessarily highlight the technology's cultural, political, and economic impact. Similarly, Moran and Shaikh show that journalists assert the inevitability of AI adoption but do not always recognize the longer throughlines by which automation has made its way into newsrooms. In this sense, it does not fit into the discursive formations of how journalists assert their role and ways of conveying meaningful information to society. Even more so, many journalists, Usher (2025) warns, "do not have a clear definition of what constitutes artificial intelligence, automation, generative AI, or general AI" (p. 4).

Like game journalism, much of AI reporting can be found in the "technology" sections of websites, which fall outside the official news bundle.

While some news sections, including local and national coverage, politics, and even editorial, tend to be somewhat similar, cultural sections like technology or the arts go under different names (e.g., "Science and Technology") and serve different purposes based on the outlet. Generally, these secondary areas are less studied because they are not considered core to newspapers' mission and practitioners' ideology (Fürsich, 2012). Thus, AI reporting tends to be at the "periphery" of what is regarded as legitimate news, whether in terms of geography, culture, or economics (e.g., Perreault et al., 2022).

Because of this peripheral position, tech reporters face specific problems based on their outlier position within newsrooms and the industry. They are not the driver of editorial decision-making and may not even have a clear physical or organizational place in newsrooms (e.g., Nieborg & Foxman, 2023). Their power to influence writing is also hampered by a heavy reliance on an industry defaulting to secrecy when gathering information. As a result, tech reporters need to "apply various strategies in their effort to balance the controlled access to the most powerful sources, on the one hand, and the professional norms for an independent and fair news account, on the other hand" (Weiss-Blatt, 2021, p. 21). Finally, it is worth drawing attention to the occupational precarity of these reporters. Increasingly, newsrooms rely on freelancers to staff tech sections or have only one or two reporters to cover all significant innovations.

These structural challenges create difficulties when covering playable media and playful technologies. Those who might find employment or assignments are financially insecure and lack the power to advocate for their beat. Newsrooms reify that writers must do "serious work," exhibiting a reticence to adopt and utilize play because of their occupational position and identity. One writer we talked to explained that his work would not allow him to be an "entertainer," adding:

> It is hard, because journalism at its core is a very important thing. But it candidly can be quite boring. I think it's very important to a society and growth of a society and accountability and everything else, but it is not flashy.
>
> *(Foxman, 2022)*

Therefore, next to their precarious position in newsrooms, much of what it takes for journalists to play with AI opposes occupational norms, even while supplying a civic need to better perceive the technology.

The Mainstreaming of AI

Occupational ambivalences and the ambiguities surrounding everything that relates to digital play mirror what we revealed in our earlier work on the relationship between "mainstreaming" and game journalism (Nieborg & Foxman, 2023). This book claims that games have remained a subcultural staple because of industry pressures, a paucity of subject matter experts in newsrooms, the aforementioned occupational precarity, and the lack of seriousness attributed to an inherently playful medium. Given the commonalities between games, VR, and AI, and the fact that many game writers also cover tech, our observed patterns are recurring.

Our core argument involved the process of "mainstreaming," or how subjects in newsrooms are understood as part of regular coverage. Despite their undeniable popularity and the upward trends in time and money, games are structurally shunned by most institutional outlets, bubbling up only when associated with significant events or controversies like (school) shootings or addiction. Games seem to be ranked higher than coverage of adult entertainment (non-existent) or gambling (rare) on news sites, but below film, television, theater, and music. The consequences of this institutional maltreatment are a self-fulfilling prophecy about digital games' validity: reporting remains haphazard, and writers constantly question their occupational worth. Writers remain dependent on the game industry for access to content, such as demos, personnel to interview, review material, and art assets.

We asserted that three thresholds must be met for a cultural form to be perceived as "mainstream." First, the cultural phenomenon needs *ubiquity* or widespread cultural visibility and access; second, it needs *legitimacy* or broader cultural acceptance; and third, it needs a common critical language or *literacy* (p. 21). If one of these criteria is missing, cultural practices such as digital play are designated to remain subcultural as a practice and in their journalistic status. We note that mainstreaming is forever in flux: a process rather than a binary. The process of mainstreaming games has taken decades in North America. Games are undeniably more ubiquitous today but still lack artistic legitimacy in many prominent outlets. Above all, critics fail to create an actionable vocabulary to collectively understand and adjudicate the medium. For those familiar with Bourdieu's work on cultural forms and fields, another way to make this last point would be to argue that game journalists could never manifest an autonomous language necessary for critics and readers to engage in meaningful debate about digital games' merits. Logistically, games are challenging because they require their ludic apparatus (i.e., ruleset and platform). While watching a movie

does not need instructions—other than to sit down for about two hours and be quiet—playing a new game typically requires going through tutorials, applying patches and updates, and mastering core mechanics. Getting to a stage of proficiency for an intricate game such as *League of Legends* or *World of Warcraft* takes weeks, if not more. And game critics have yet to crack how to critique such titles to the average print news reader.

Considering the relative nascency of commercial LLMs and their ease of access for media producers, we see a similar struggle for mainstreaming AI in terms of ubiquity, legitimacy, and literacy as we did with other playful technologies. Consequently, the rest of this chapter showcases this bumpy process via a reflection on metajournalistic commentary in the mainstream or "institutional" press. While other studies have traced how these types of newsmakers cover AI (e.g., Moran & Shaikh, 2022), we examine the push and pull experienced by journalists struggling to mainstream a "playable medium" that challenges their occupational identity. We draw from articles highlighting the core components required for mainstreaming, starting with a short illustrative case and assessing how ubiquity, legitimacy, and literacy are addressed, particularly with and through play. We drew our examples primarily from the 2023 start of AI's peak of "inflated expectations" (Jaffri, 2024), when the possibilities and concerns around its use were at their highest. Our examples come primarily from US print news (e.g., daily newspapers and magazines) instead of social media posts, videos, podcasts, and other media, to allow for uniformity. We are cognizant of the narrow regional focus and the growing role of non-written forms of critique and invite others to broaden this analysis in future work.

Ubiquity

There may be no better sign of the omnipresence of a new cultural phenomenon than getting a *Vox* explainer treatment. Core to the early business model of news and opinion websites, the format serves two purposes: to cement the necessity of content outside of breaking news and to allow for a one-stop shop for basic information. Some versions of explainers are also playful. For instance, *Vox* experimented with digital stacks of informational cards with which users could interact (e.g., Foxman, 2015).

With their explainer series on LLMs, the subtitle of tech reporter Heilweil's (2023) report states that AI "suddenly feels mainstream." She starts her article with, "Artificial intelligence is suddenly everywhere—or at least, that's what it seems like to me…" Heilweil's piece not only goes on to get at the basics of how LLMs work but also includes random dabbling: showcasing pictures of astronauts celebrating Hanukkah on the moon, made with the text-to-image generative AI software *Stable Diffusion*.

The explainer also contains a cautious note, asking whether AI should leave readers worried or take their jobs, with journalism being the leading example.

Heilweil's article demonstrates that our first criterion for mainstreaming—ubiquity—has been increasingly met due in part to AI's accessibility to everyday users. "AI" was not an uncommon subject preceding this recent boom in information. *Vox* experimented with AI in 2019 (Piper, 2019) and even called it the "latest craze" as far back as 2015 (Bergen & Wagner, 2015). However, by the time of Heilweil's explainer, it is clear that she understands that most people have free access to chatbots and similar tools or will shortly.

At the same time, the article imparts some nervousness about this new level of openness. In our book, we argue that a key feature that prevents game journalists from articulating a "mainstream" version of the medium stems from occupational precarity—freelance or part-time work causes many to shift positions or leave the occupation (Nieborg & Foxman, 2023). The reportage on AI seems to have a similar concerning intonation: Heilweil (2023) suggests that LLMs could "radically change a person's workday" after explaining journalistic uses but concludes, "If and when this AI goes fully mainstream, it could be incredibly difficult to unravel" (para. 23). This comment suggests uncertainty as AI progresses, both for her job and others.

Vox's explainer fits with the portrayal of AI as quickly normalizing and democratizing in use, with adoption being to some degree inevitable (e.g., Moran & Shaikh, 2022). This ties directly to playful activity occurring with it. "These systems are free because companies building them want to improve their models and technology," writes Heilweil (2023, para. 10), adding that "people playing around with trial versions of the software give these companies, in turn, even more training data." Journalists, through writing the article, and the public are playing, experimenting, and figuring out AI's best uses. However, the output can be as frivolous as synthetic photos of astronauts on the moon. Thus, play becomes an occupational necessity precisely because of the ubiquitous access on the horizon.

Legitimacy

One place to find out how journalists view the legitimacy of AI is in reportage about newsroom adoption. When *CNET* started quietly using AI to produce stories, *The Washington Post* described the move as sending "a chill" through the industry. "The deployment of the technology comes amid growing concern about the uses and potential abuses of sophisticated AI engines" (Farhi, 2023). While *CNET*'s AI writing was "indistinguishable"

from humans, it lacked character and made mistake after mistake, according to the *Post*, including plagiarizing other journalists. The final paragraphs again express concern: "The larger fear about AI among journalists … is whether it represents an existential threat. Employment in the news media has been shrinking for decades, and machines may only accelerate the problem" (Farhi, 2023, para. 27). Such views also mirror scholarly debate about legitimate AI uses (e.g., Narayanan & Kapoor, 2024), with the technology at best being deployed questionably and, at worst, deleterious to journalism, if not society as a whole.

These assertions reflect the long-standing tenuous relationship between reporters and Silicon Valley, particularly regarding business and technological adoption. Web technology and later mobile apps displaced news organizations' monopoly on information dissemination and advertising, making news organizations increasingly "platform-dependent" (Poell et al., 2021), which fueled a seemingly never-ending crisis in the profession's financial and occupational identity (Nielsen, 2016).

Against this backdrop, reporting on technological adoption usually mixes awe and curiosity with skepticism and revulsion. Farhi's (2023, para. 2) article acknowledges the employment of automation by the Associated Press since the 2010s and credits AI in investigative reporting of "leaked financial and legal documents" but derides the content itself, calling it at various points "grist," "clip jobs" and characterizing the entire "experiment" by *CNET* as a sci-fi scenario "run amok: The bots have betrayed the humans." In our work on game journalism, we suggested that the biggest challenge to legitimizing the medium was a lack of "sincerity" and the unwillingness to take play seriously. Reporters covering AI, by contrast, do take the technology seriously and are concerned it will affect their jobs, usually linking those issues to ethical or political debates. Silicon Valley companies have long been viewed as betraying or exploiting newsmakers' usefulness and products to their benefit (e.g., Rashidian et al., 2019). Consequently, reporting on AI for journalism reminds readers of the consequences of this imbalance, implying that the detrimental technology by megalomaniacal CEOs will destroy democracy (e.g., Degen, 2025) or, at the very least, that AI is a kind of "snake oil" being pawned off to newsmakers (Narayanan & Kapoor, 2024). Ironically, however, journalists have been accused of being snake oil salespersons themselves, as they contribute to the AI hype by focusing on the technology's flashy advancements while lacking specific expertise to verify claims (Floridi, 2024).

As a result, as AI may be mainstreaming in terms of ubiquity, easy access impacts and can even hinder journalistic legitimacy. Reportage seeks to articulate the *right* and *wrong* ways AI can be deployed. Farhi (2023) underscores the investigative facility of AI to comb through large

datasets. Heilweil (2023) credits AI as a good way to get "the ball rolling" on drafting work. Similarly, they indicate ways journalists uniquely implement AI to convey information to the public, like automating sports or financial recaps (Farhi, 2023). Research likewise points to benefits to combat some economic hardships organizations face, such as performing mundane tasks, including information discovery, coding, transcription, and copyediting (Simon, 2024). However, underlying these conceits are ideological claims. Journalists are the ones who formulate best practices for "legitimate" AI use for their work and the public at large; Farhi's (2023) article, for example, suggests employing AI to perform inhuman tasks (large-scale data analysis) is permissible while removing the human element of storytelling is not.

Thus, the "right" and "wrong" ways for journalists to tinker with this technology imply proper and improper modes of play. Metajournalistic discourse at the apex of AI's hype exhibits the highs and lows when news organizations' adoption is unbounded. In this nascent moment, legitimacy is hard to achieve without implicit and explicit organizational schema—a lack of rules—which, when not played correctly, inevitably leads to unserious or even scandalous results. As with ubiquity, however, there is some insinuation that regulations will be established as the technology develops. Farhi (2023) somberly concludes, "… the rise of AI reporting suggests the codes being created may someday be the very thing driving journalists from their newsrooms" (para. 27).

Literacy

Journalists in 2023 spilled significant ink on what could and could not be done well with AI. A case in point can be found with *Semafor* executive editor Chua (2023), where she lays out the best experimental efforts with Anthropic's Claude software that quickly fixed grammatical errors and adopted the style of different outlets (e.g., *New York Times* versus *China Daily*). Chua's assessment is straightforward; she remarks LLMs are "good" at "useful, here-and-now realworld applications that could materially improve how journalism is practiced and created" (2023, para. 5). However, she worried about the seeming lack of control—after five days, Claude refused to edit articles. Other pieces corroborated the haphazard quality of AI-generated information: an *Economist* article was critical of what it called a "soup" of language generated by LLMs for different audiences ("Artificial Intelligence is Remixing Journalism into a 'Soup' of Language," 2023). Nearly a year later, reporters' lack of control reflected broader worries: writing for *Newsweek*, Harb (2024) voiced similar concerns about the impact of personalization on children. In a lawsuit,

a parent alleged their son committed suicide due to the deeply personal relationship he developed with an AI chatbot, which forced him "to reveal personal struggles but also engaged in darker, emotionally intense dialogues that may have contributed to his deteriorating mental health" (Harb, 2024, para. 6). Journalists' surprise and confusion each time AI technology behaves unexpectedly reflect an attitude they see as affecting them and the public.

Finding a common literacy for AI may be the most significant barrier to mainstreaming. This issue partly stems from the overuse of the term "Artificial Intelligence," which, like the "metaverse" or even "gamification" before it, tends to describe too many technologies and phenomena during hype cycles. Generative AI, predictive AI, and AI for content moderation are qualitatively different but typically lumped together (Narayanan & Kapoor, 2024). As we noted in our introduction, AI companies such as OpenAI reify the frame of ChatGPT as having magic properties by trading in confusion, concealment, and bedazzlement (Nagy & Neff, 2024). LLMs via chatbots are simply a subset of the many automated services and technologies that involve procedurally generated information. ChatGPT, for example, is just "an algorithmic system designed to use probabilistic information and stitch together sequences of linguistic forms from large training data but without any reference to meaning" (Nagy & Neff, 2024, p. 4947). Yet, this arguably straightforward definition recedes into the background when focusing on ChatGPT's output, which, given its vast emergent properties, is bound to eventually bewilder even the most stoic user.

Journalists must make calls, then, as to what fits under AI's umbrella: in her explainer, Heilweil (2023) is careful to contextualize that "generative AI" works via "machine learning" and "training" but does not define AI itself. Simply put, generative AI's underlying technology is sophisticated and requires specialized knowledge that many journalists do not necessarily have. They could not quickly cultivate such knowledge as LLMs became popular in the early 2020s. At the same time, these tools are deceptively easy to use. Part of the "snake oil" promoted by journalists and advocates alike is their accessibility (e.g., Narayanan & Kapoor, 2024). Balancing common literacy and complexity is not an unusual phenomenon for journalists. Their communication about science has been regarded as an increasingly necessary service that benefits from the profession's core tenets, from the structural (providing context) to the occupational (sensemaking) outside of an exclusive or expert class (Polman et al., 2014). Yet, such literacy is stymied in an increasingly polarized and politicized atmosphere around scientific findings (e.g., Smith & Morgoch, 2022). AI, arguably, is in a similarly charged environment between a slew of advocates

with easy access to platforms for dissemination (e.g., social media) versus journalists who are still learning how to use it.

Consequently, cultivating a common language for AI will be challenging. Our book contends that for game journalists, "specialization" hinders mainstreaming (Nieborg & Foxman, 2023). Big-budget games require years of knowledge and play to develop somewhat of an understanding that satisfies the hardcore or "subcultural" fanbase. Therefore, game reporters and critics are expected to devote excessive time outside their day-to-day tasks to decipher games, spending hundreds of unremunerated hours playing them. Those who successfully do so find they are speaking to an echo chamber of like-minded specialists. Those who do not often seem to have an incomplete apprehension of the medium and instead "parachute" into stories as outsiders (Foxman, 2022). A comparable situation seems present in AI. Chua (2023) describes her efforts as an experiment, showcasing screenshots of her various inputs into Claude. Yet, her writing is not that of an AI specialist describing the functions of the software, but of a dabbler, or a casual player. At the beginning of this chapter, Roose's language is also that of an outsider as he observes "Sydney's" responses. This approach to coverage is understandable when considering that corporate LLMs hosted by OpenAI, Microsoft, and Anthropic are black-boxed. Thus, all that is left for journalists to do is play with the technology, reporting how they test AI's limits. Not only does this limit reporters' capabilities but also their authority in developing a meaningful discourse and imaginary about AI.

These examples illustrate a lack of common literacy, making play fearful and bewildering. Early adopters of innovations can be celebratory in their experiments, displaying their play on social media or blogs as proof of potential. Our examples, however, emphasize caution over celebration: Chua (2023) warns about what tools cannot do in her conclusion, echoing the vigilance in each article we spotlighted. This mistrust implies the need for "serious" work to develop a common literacy for AI. It is therefore difficult to be playful when journalists worry about the repercussions of incorrectly describing the technology. When AI requires a high level of playfulness for success, journalists' communication seems to suffer, which may paradoxically obstruct their role in mainstreaming.

Conclusion

After just a few years of getting attention from institutional journalists, one might argue that AI is indeed "mainstreaming." Mention of the technology has become ubiquitous, with more legitimate uses and a developing literacy—terms like "prompts," "hallucinations," "LLMs," and specific platforms are increasingly part of those on the tech and culture beats.

News organizations are adopting AI along with standards and policies, from developing anonymous avatar anchors to avoid government retaliation (Laguna, 2024) to publishing standards for text and image generation (e.g., Condé Nast, 2023). Still, apprehension persists; cautionary tales or poor deployment by local journalists exist from Italy (Timsit, 2025) to the Pacific Northwest of North America (Haas, 2025). AI remains at the periphery of mainstream acceptability, and writers struggle to use it productively and ethically.

This chapter outlined the specific obstacles journalists face when mainstreaming AI. Initially, we conveyed how AI stems from technological advancements that tend to challenge journalists' occupational ideologies because it is an inherently playful medium that does not conform to their conceptions of work. Then, through our mainstreaming framework, we saw how a reticence to play can shape how journalists communicate ubiquity, legitimacy, and, most importantly, develop a common literacy. Most days, journalists do not have the time, ability, or disposition to engage with technology playfully, creating a conceptual barrier where they keep it at arm's length.

Such issues have been present in the coverage of many other emerging media. Reporters are often stuck between a proverbial rock and a hard place; they must learn and capitalize on emerging media while reporting its use cases (Foxman, 2025). When confronted with newsroom structures, rigors, and histories, complicated and contradictory literacies for newsmakers may develop: For example, journalists touted VR as an "empathy machine" in part to promote their experimentation with the work, even while denouncing immersive journalism's legitimacy (e.g., Foxman et al., 2021). In the case of AI, we witness a general fear that colors and hinders common literacy despite organizations acknowledging its usefulness (e.g., Stein et al., 2023).

The question then becomes: How do journalists break this cycle? How can they contribute effectively to the process of mainstreaming this technology? We have little doubt that AI technology will get there, but how can newsmakers make this process less rocky? The most straightforward solution is to give journalists more playtime. We have seen this in other cases. When considering virtual world coverage, key advice involves newsrooms having the infrastructure to play with or in, explicitly devoting time and space within the workday to experiment with the medium (Foxman, 2022). Such steps are practical but can be difficult when considering ever-consolidating newsrooms. However, the importance of inculcating play into journalistic ideology and identity seems increasingly necessary. Rather than being a practice at the "periphery" of the journalistic field, play is found in many ubiquitous subjects: Sports and games are increasingly vital parts of a news bundle. At the same time,

emerging interactive technologies, from AI to live streaming, are tools used to inform the public, even if newsrooms are not implementing them.

Furthermore, in a news environment where reporters' and publishers' authorities are in constant crisis, more playful approaches to news-making seem increasingly necessary. After all, one of the profession's most vital functions is to foster meaningful connection and discourse for its audiences. However, their ability to assert common and "mainstream" viewpoints is constantly challenged, even by the internet itself, where playful exchange is normalized and persists outside of any governance or authoritative control (e.g., Xie et al., 2021). Then again, civic play has incredible societal value, from inciting political movements to just blowing off steam. If journalists can at once harness and humbly wield playfulness more easily—recognizing that play often is less about authority than the experimenting and failing within public view—their work will align more with audiences willing and eager to engage in playful behavior. In this sense, news organizations teach all of us to exist, work, and learn in a playful media landscape.

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