

Hallucinating a political future: Global press coverage of human and post-human abilities in ChatGPT applications

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Abstract

In November 2022, the tech company OpenAI launched a groundbreaking chatbot model, ChatGPT. This unprecedented chatbot, characterized by an ease of use for lay internet users, gained immediate popularity and attracted extensive media attention. This article examines global press coverage of ChatGPT in peak reporting dates over the first full year of its existence. Based on a qualitative holistic narrative analysis, our findings point to two narrated scapes of political fear in the coverage of ChatGPT: The fear of the machine and the fear of the human. These attest to the collective imagining of an intensified future, where post-humanist interaction with political information is associated with exploitation, propaganda, and polarization of existing political rifts. We draw on the case study to articulate journalists' role in signaling instability in the current political media ecosystem, and their construction of a techno-moral framework for society. We discuss an important blind-spot in journalists' fulfilment of their normative role in fostering technology-informed citizens globally.

Keywords

AI, chatbot, ChatGPT, coverage, hallucinations, narrative analysis, news, posthuman

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Introduction

In November 2022, the tech company OpenAI launched a groundbreaking chatbot model, ChatGPT. Only 2 months later, ChatGPT gained 100 million active users, positioning it as the fastest-growing AI tool ever. This chatbot is characterized by an ease of use for lay internet users and utility for extracting information from prompts-based “conversations” with an AI platform (Guo et al., 2023; Lock, 2022). ChatGPT’s tremendous popularity resurfaced discussions about human-machine relations, including questions about fakery, manipulation, knowledge, responsibility, and agency (Ienca, 2023; Simchon et al., 2023). Particular attention is being paid to the post-human condition imposed by ChatGPT, with much scientific effort aimed at comparing human and machines’ abilities (Guo et al., 2023). Among others, the discussion of ChatGPT elaborates of the simultaneous anxiety and enthusiasm of technological superiority, acknowledging the shifting balance of dominance between human and machine, where human agency is shared with, even exceeded by, algorithmic elements (Kalpokas, 2019; Pepperell, 1995; Simon et al., 2023).

In the current global political climate, discussions surrounding chat-bots include deliberations about political use and utility (Cadwalladr, 2022; Simchon et al., 2023). Much of the debate about these themes occurred in journalistic reporting, where international newspapers covered the possible threats (e.g. manipulation and deception) bot accounts hold over political processes around the world (Gorwa and Guilbeault, 2020).

Granted, questions regarding political manipulation and journalistic coverage have been investigated for decades in media and communication studies. Yet, scholars stress that the ever-increasing use of digital technologies, and chat-bots like ChatGPT in particular, make the interplay of politics, press, and manipulation/deception an urgent topic that requires ongoing discussions in public platforms, legislation, and academia (Grigsby, 2017; Schia and Gjesvik, 2020). Within the valuable work on analyzing global journalistic coverage of emerging technologies, little scholarly effort is being directed specifically at AI (Brennen et al., 2022; Cahane and Shwartz Altshuler, 2023; Marciano, 2019; Yadlin-Segal and Oppenheim, 2021). This is particularly true in the case of ChatGPT given its novelty, albeit the remarkable popularity and quick adoption of this technology.

This dearth is conspicuous as both legislators and the public’s awareness of a given problem and the path to its resolution depend, among others, on the information provided by news media (Shih et al., 2008). Therefore, a crucial gap in knowledge remains how news media address the diffusion and regulation of these technologies (Yadlin-Segal and Oppenheim, 2021). With the growing popularity of ChatGPT, this article asks to answer the question: What are the main journalistic narratives constructed and promoted through the coverage of ChatGPT in global news outlets?

This study explores articulations of political imageries as reflected in journalistic coverage of information and communication technologies. It addresses an unprecedented adoption process of a communication platform – ChatGPT – and aims to better understand it as a reflection of global hopes and fears as it unfolds. As Natale and Guzman (2022) remind us in an article published in this journal, the ever-growing advances in AI technology pose new kinds of questions and challenges to our discipline, requiring us to

constantly explore the socio-cultural processes in which AI technologies are intertwined within human systems of meaning-making. Their article thus contributes to the ongoing discussion on the role information and communication technologies play in liberating and restricting society vis-à-vis the role journalism plays in evaluations of these technologies.

Literature review

Understanding political manipulation in the age of generative AI

Recent studies about the spread of online information show that human behavior might contribute to falsity more than automated systems do (Vosoughi et al., 2018). And while “[H]armful lies are nothing new” (Chesney and Citron, 2019, p. 1753), the ability to distort reality through generative, synthetic media has taken an exponential leap forward, resulting in a significant shift in the global political communication ecosystem.

While the possible impact of these technologies is still debated (Simon et al., 2023), it is agreed that the increasing availability of, and accessibility to, generative AI applications matter. Studies have shown that misuse (even abuse) of these technologies is no longer merely the ability to produce “false information” (Chesney and Citron, 2019; Simchon et al., 2023) but also the ability to rapidly spread false and misleading information with little to no human intervention. This warrants close attention to the potential vulnerability of socio-political discourses, where informed discussions about the changing nature of decision-making, and even the threat to democracy should occur (Schia and Gjesvik, 2020).

In the context of using generative AI technologies for political campaigning purposes, journalistic reports reveal that political actors used a global infrastructure working within 68 countries to manipulate voters by using personal data collection and message targeting through machine learning applications on social media platforms (e.g. the political scandal of Cambridge Analytica, Cadwalladr, 2022). Here, weaponizing information for political gain, particularly manipulated and doctrine information, continue to give grounds for worldwide concern (Schia and Gjesvik, 2020). While deception and manipulation on such scale may or may not involve falsehoods, scholars urge us to acknowledge that the manipulative and persuasive potentials of such technologies through micro-targeting, nudging, adaptive preference formation, and manipulating choice architectures redefine citizens’ agency and freedom in modern societies (Ienca, 2023; Segessenmann et al., 2003). Moreover, these technologies’ potential to produce stand-alone, independent, effective personalized political messages tailored to individuals’ personalities is alarming (Simchon et al., 2023).

According to Schia and Gjesvik (2020), as part of this growing techno-political trend, a fundamental challenge in global politics is the shifting power dynamics between digital platforms and governments. When it comes to preventing such malicious use, they ask: “Who has the power to determine the limitations of political discourse? What information is presented to individuals? What are the limits of free speech?” But to make these important discussions in society, the public and policymakers must first be informed of the topic. Press has become an important arena for exploring these themes, as “leading

international newspapers have extensively covered the now-widely accepted threat posed by malicious bot accounts trying to covertly influence political processes around the world” (Gorwa and Guilbeault, 2020, p. 226).

Studies have shown that news media play an important role in raising awareness and conveying the influence of emerging communication and information technologies both to the public (Marciano, 2019) and to policymakers (Greenberg and Hier, 2009). In this context, while the press constitutes an important arena in which pressing questions regarding new media technologies are debated, less academic attention has been given to the ways the press frames internet policies and regulation (Yadlin-Segal and Oppenheim, 2021). As effective policies are increasingly important for domestic and international purposes, the question of their coverage becomes even more crucial. Hence, we further unpack scholarly literature on this meeting place in the following section.

Before we turn to elaborate on news media coverage of emerging technologies, we note that this study also engages with and aims to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on the technological imaginary (Donovan, 2015; Mager and Katzenbach, 2021), defined as individual and collective beliefs and understandings about the role of technology in social life (Donovan, 2015; Ferrari, 2020). In recent years, this scholarly corpus has expanded to include the study of the discursive imaginaries of AI (Cave, 2023; Romele, 2023). Studying how AI technologies are narrated, constructed, and imagined is important because “discursive and public imaginations play a pivotal role in envisioning and determining the trajectories of AI and its integration into society” (Richter et al., 2023, p. 209).

Importantly, although imaginaries of technology may have real-world implications, they are often inaccurate and distorted (Donovan, 2015). Scholars have suggested two overarching insights regarding the technological imaginary. First, Ferrari (2020) argues that the current dominant technological imaginary has three key characteristics: (1) it depicts new technologies as free, democratic, and supportive of autonomy; (2) it endorses the notion of technosolutionism, according to which social problems can be solved through technologies rather than policy, and (3) it derives from and legitimizes a neoliberal atmosphere (Ferrari, 2020). Second, as Mager and Katzenbach (2021: 23) conclude, “imaginaries are increasingly dominated by technology companies that not only take over the imaginative power of shaping future society, but also partly absorb public institutions’ ability to govern these very futures with their rhetoric, technologies, and business models.” Our analysis will employ these insights by exploring AI technologies coverage.

Exploring news media coverage of emerging technologies

It is well established in scholarly literature that journalistic coverage allows a glimpse into political, social, and cultural trends and policies, being an important arena due to its potential impact on audiences (Nisbet and Lewenstein, 2002; Yadlin and Marciano, 2022). From Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs, 2005) through Framing Theory and Priming Theory (Entman, 1993; Iyengar and Kinder, 2010) all the way to Communication as Culture Theory (Carey, 1989), communication scholars of different traditions agree that journalistic coverage influences how people think about, prioritize, and judge the

world (Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007). The salience of different topics in news media, their positioning along the news cycle, as well as the interpretive frames associated with them affect the public's agenda, as it directs attention to specific actions, constructing them as positive or negative, legitimate or illegitimate (Gamson, 2004; Iyengar and Kinder, 2010; Nisbet and Huye, 2006).

The relationship between media, culture, and society was articulated by Carey (1989). According to Carey's approach, news media can be understood as two distinct allegories: transmission vs. ritual. Looking at communication as transmission, media outlets are viewed as channels for the flow of information between senders and receivers. Alternatively, news media outlets can also be viewed as facilitators of shared symbols and experiences that build agreement regarding the boundaries and characteristics of society across time. News consumption, in this sense, becomes an act of meaningful gatherings crucial for the maintenance and reinforcement of social, political, and cultural codes of a community. Many times, news media are being understood not only as a means for disseminating information to the public, but rather as a blueprint under which reality is produced and communicated (Carey, 1989).

News media also orient audiences' attention to different aspects related to emerging technologies (Shih et al., 2008). This is true not only for communication and information technology. In the broader context of technological innovation (e.g. biotechnology and nanotechnology), as media issue-attention cycles for emerging technologies progressed, news attention advanced from novelty frames to policy frames, highlighting the ethical or moral components of a technology with some variations in the thematic focus between traditional and new journalistic platforms (Cacciatore et al., 2012; Nisbet and Huye, 2006). And when it comes to the case of emerging communication and information technologies, the question of framing becomes important for discussion.

On the one hand, news media coverage of emerging communication and information technologies often remains hysteric, superficial, and either utopian or dystopian (Marciano, 2019; Yadlin-Segal and Oppenheim, 2021). On the other hand, the public awareness of a problem, often gained through news media, prompts concern and efforts toward a solution (Shih et al., 2008). Thus, news outlets that might play an important role in "disseminating the required information to successful policy diffusion" (Crow, 2012, p. 38), often lack in-depth and complex coverage (Cahane and Shwartz Altshuler, 2023).

And while news media can inform policymakers on pressing issues, it appears that state-level legislators that are entrusted with crafting effective laws often lack necessary knowledge on emerging communication and information technologies and the networked society (Muñoz Saldaña and Azurmendi Adarraga, 2018; Wirtz et al., 2022). Over the years this has resulted in the implementation of fuzzy, outdated, and ineffective structures, laws, and regulations of emerging technologies (Marchant, 2011; Prunkl et al., 2021; Srivastava, 2012).

Hence, scholars are encouraged to continuously explore the social and political implications of these technologies as they are being discussed by the press (Cacciatore et al., 2012). If we take seriously the premise that news media inform and propel policy-related urgency in the public and in state level decision-makers (Cohen et al., 2008; Gamson, 2004), then an important first step toward solution is assessing the primary condition to this relationship, that is, press coverage of a particular emerging technology. We join the

conversation by exploring the news coverage of ChatGPT, and in particular the political implications attributed to the platform and its articulation as a digital frontier requiring policy and regulation.

Methodologies of data collection and analysis

Data collection

Following a growing trend in digital media and journalism studies (Latzko-Toth et al., 2017; Yadlin-Segal and Oppenheim, 2021), we have employed a multi-level data sampling process combining automated and manual stages of data retrieval. To this end, we have used the big-data scraping platform *Buzzilla* (based on crawlers of Alexa news rank). Through this platform, we have identified a total of 16,600 journalistic items published in the English language.

Scholars studying the coverage of ChatGPT stress that very limited use of data sets on ChatGPT that were collected globally (for a thorough discussion of the topic see Roe and Perkins, 2023). This localized-oriented lacuna begs a global, cross-national holistic analysis to understand English coverage in a diversified corpus of multiple nations. To reach this corpus we have used the keywords “chatgpt” or “chat gpt,” to be located either in the items’ headline or subject/topic. These items were published over a full year, from the day ChatGPT platform was inaugurated in November 2022 up to October 2023.

After achieving this comprehensive data set of news items ($n=16,600$), we sifted through data to achieve a workable corpus for a qualitative analysis. First, we followed the natural trend behavior of data over the examined period. We looked for unique reporting peaks in the coverage of ChatGPT and found three dates in which the highest number of items were published per day: February 7, 2023 ($n=153$; main coverage: Google unveils its AI tool Bard), May 2, 2023 ($n=155$; main coverage: Geoffrey Hinton, “Godfather of AI” leaves Google to warn of AI dangers), and May 16, 2023 ($n=171$; main coverage: Sam Altman, OpenAI’s CEO, testifies before US Congress). Our aim was not to explore why these three key dates likely saw a peak in coverage, but rather, to produce a workable corpus that is informed by, and grounded in, the studied phenomenon. Moreover, as Derecho and Lim (2018) show, dates of peak reporting on an event in the English language represent a more diverse pool of global news outlets of varied national orientations worldwide.

This sampling strategy provides fertile ground for in-depth analysis of all items published globally in the three most abundant days of coverage. Indeed, given that this is a qualitative study, we favored in-depth exploration over a statistically representative corpus. This compromise favors a manual, thorough exploration of a workable corpus based on the principles of holistic narrative analysis over a computational-automatic analysis of the full, initial corpus.

Thus, we constructed a finalized corpus of 294 globally published news items reflecting a diverse pool of sources. We included all item types (i.e. news, opinions, and editorials) which were approached holistically to understand the overall tone and story communicated to the public, *inter alia* due to the increasingly blurred distinction between

different types of online journalistic writings (see Bal, 2009). This becomes even more prevalent in reporting on emerging technologies, where journalistic coverage goes beyond the scope of technology sections (Shaikh and Moran, 2022) thus requiring a thorough exploration across different online news outlets' sections. To avoid clutter in the article, the full list of news items, including titles, dates of publication, and source name is available as an Supplemental Appendix. Our findings below are supported by examples from the journalistic items analyzed. References to the articles consist of a letter representing the day of coverage (A for February 7, B for May 2, or C for May 16) followed by the items' ordinal numbers. To extract the main narratives that identify journalistic coverage of ChatGPT in these items we have employed a holistic-qualitative narrative analysis.

Data analysis

Holistic narrative analysis focuses on outlining a narrative by exploring the different "parts" or "lines" that mark the key moments in the development of a story (Lieblich et al., 1998). In the development of new media platforms, these "life narratives" can be explored through the press, to understand how technology is presented to society (Yadlin-Segal and Oppenheim, 2021). Thus, we have explored the story told by journalists about ChatGPT through narrative inquiry, relying on Mishler's (1986) six components of holistic interpretive decoding of narratives:

1. Abstract: a summarized version of the story's main point, or, our interpretation of it.
2. Orientation: contextual cues that direct us to key issues in the story such as place, time, and characters.
3. Complicating action: an event or a series of events that cause a problem or a conflict. Such actions express and reflect broader cultural frameworks of meanings related to the narrative.
4. Evaluation: appreciative comments on the events, characters, and places appearing in the narrative, some justifications of its telling, or the meaning that the teller gives to an event.
5. Result or resolution: the closure of the story or the issue\conflict presented by the speaker.
6. Coda: the point of bringing the narrator and listener (or reader, audiences) back to a shared present.

A high level of inter-rater reliability (94%) was found between the two authors (Uebersax, 1987) in the identification of Mishler's (1986) six components. The multi-layered corpus and analysis process allowed us "both the breadth and scope of big-data collection as well as the holistic, meaningful, and context-grounded depth of small-scale qualitative analysis" (Yadlin-Segal and Oppenheim, 2021: 48). Together, the sifted data corpus and the six narrative analysis categories helped us unpack the narratives journalists constructed through coverage of ChatGPT.

Analysis and Findings: ChatGPT and the future of society

Our analysis suggests that journalists addressed ChatGPT through a complex and layered approach, focusing on both positive use of the technology and concerns stemming from malicious use. The imagery that best represents this discussion was featured multiple times throughout the corpus in the coverage of the May 16th US Senate hearing with Sam Altman, OpenAI's CEO, where senators pondered the political global future as dependent on technological advancements. Here the discussion touched on whether ChatGPT was as transformative as the printing press, harbinger for a more empowered civilization and increased liberty, disseminating knowledge more widely, or rather as destructive as the atomic bomb, which continues to haunt the nations of the world today (e.g. C193, C234, and C253).

As such, on the one hand, a wide range of concerns have been raised, for example in the context of losing intellectual property in the creative professions (e.g. A4, A8, B95, and B118), fakery, falsely attributing authorship, and plagiarism in higher education (e.g. A10, A42, B107, C198, and C199), job lose and job market turbulence (e.g. A70, A72, B111, B112, and C248) and harm to privacy (e.g. A44, B125, and C192).

As part of this approach, a wide range of negative descriptions were attributed to the technology on an accelerating spectrum: From powerful (A1), annoying (A7), and low accuracy technology (e.g. A17 and A20), through descriptions such as human-like sentient machine (e.g. A14, A20, and A51) that proliferates scams and misinformation (B150), producing biased and potentially harmful answers (e.g. C208 and C212) all the way to disrupting (B109) "new robot overlords" (B167) that "pose existential risk" (B96) to society and humanity (B147), potentially "manipulating humans into ceding control" (e.g. C205, C214, C222, and C227), profoundly unsettling our sense of reality and our own humanity (B149).

On the other hand, we also found hesitations as to the hysterical depiction of ChatGPT, and even positive descriptions of it, albeit more scarce in volume and lesser in complexity. Healthcare and medicine were one such area of complex, even positive use and predictions, where ChatGPT was assessed (e.g. C264 and C275). Journalists acknowledged the risk of complete automatization of health-related processes (B98) while discussing a potential of elevating everyday lives of patients with chronic health conditions (e.g. B151 and C235), improving diagnosis and health services (e.g. B131 and B186) and advancing health education (B131).

In this sense, journalists do acknowledge a technology's ability to act both as an opportunity and a disruption. "Like is the case before the spread of any new technology" they tell us, "currently, all kinds of varying forecasts are being made" (C283). In this line of thought "[T]he history of technological spread tells us that it is very difficult to forecast which way any technology will go and the economic and social impact it will eventually have. Nonetheless, one can always indulge in some speculative thinking" (C283).

And indulging in some speculative thinking they did. In the context of politics, and specifically in predictions of ChatGPT in domestic and foreign affairs, we found that journalists employed only a negative, dreadful perspective, to convey the grave weight of ChatGPT in society. While scholars argue for a possible dual technology implication

in politics (Simon et al., 2023), it seems that journalistic coverage of ChatGPT use in politics was lacking in complexity.

As we elaborate in the following passages, we have found two main narratives of reference to using ChatGPT in politics that drive the need for significant regulatory measures: A fear of the machine, with specific references to technology exceeding human abilities, causing harm and chaos, and a second narrative of fearing human abilities enabled by harnessing the malicious power of the ChatGPT machine. Even though in several cases the two narratives were reflected in the same journalistic item, overall data analysis shows that they are distinct from each other, even conflicting. Below we thoroughly explore these two narratives drawing on examples from the data corpus. In our discussion of journalistic discourse and narrative we do not differentiate between the journalist's own voice and the source voices presented in the text. It is agreed that journalistic narratives are indeed often constructed by multiple actors and voices (Strömbäck et al., 2013).

On the one hand, including sources in news reporting might highlight the source's own agenda, reflecting considerable discursive power (Niemi and Pitkänen, 2017). On the other hand, the literature suggests that news media's source practices serve multiple public and civic purposes: From providing reliable and valuable information, through constructing legitimacy to coverage via status and expertise, all the way to offering points of identification and varied viewpoints (for elaborated discussion see: Strömbäck et al., 2013). This trend becomes even more crucial when considering the growing complexity of technology-oriented issues, which require a highly technical expertise to fully unpack (Nisbet and Lewenstein, 2002).

In this sense, the following paragraphs exemplify a holistic approach to the journalistic texts which represent a finalized package of sources and voices to consumers. Thus, in accordance with the principles of holistic qualitative analysis, the presentation of each of the findings will be followed by grounded discussions in existing knowledge thereafter as to illuminate the meanings of the finding and make connection with literature in the field (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2008).

Fear of the machine in the political realm

The first narration of fear in ChatGPT political use addressed fakery and misinformation, with some discussions of the potent, even greater-than-human power of the machine. In this context journalists worldwide argued that “[T]ools like chatGPT provide the illusion of an all-knowing being answering your questions” (A62) while ultimately proliferate spread of misinformation (e.g. A5, A7, and B150), resulting in manipulation of users' views (C191) with particular fear of interference with election integrity (C241).

Journalists also warned readers that “The risks. . . are that inaccuracies or misinformation can seep into responses, and – depending on how results are presented – users may not be able to tell the source or veracity of information that the service has given as a definitive answer” (A64). “It's one of my areas of greatest concern – the more general ability of these models to manipulate, to persuade, to provide sort of one-on-one interactive disinformation,” the Washington Post (C233) quoted Sam Altman in the Senate hearing, stressing that even though “previously banning the use of ChatGPT for political purposes, the company adopted a more tailored policy this year that bans ‘generating high volumes of campaign

materials.” In these cases, journalists stressed the technological advancements putting us in danger through “what if” questions about events that might happen.

Hallucinations of a machine. A specific subcategory of misinformation was designated to ChatGPT hallucinations, presented in press as a leading cause for potential disruption in the political arena. According to Vice (B128), ChatGPT “hallucinates” when it makes up facts, spreading misinformation by making up “inaccurate or entirely false answers” (C239). As such, reporting stressed that ChatGPT is “still not fully reliable” because it “still ‘hallucinates’ facts and makes reasoning errors” (C236). “Because its training data lacks a reliable source of truth, the tool may produce factually inaccurate replies” (C190) reporters stress. They continue: “Hallucinations, a potentially harmful propensity of ChatGPT that results in erroneous responses, consistently employed confident language, even when it was untrue. . . this is particularly risky if used as the sole source of knowledge, especially for beginners who might not be able to distinguish between confident and wrong responses” (C190).

NPR (A1, A69) informed its audience that “When you ask it [ChatGPT] a question, it can do what’s known as hallucinating, or confidently stating things that are just straight-up made up.” They continued: “That’s obviously concerning. And if AI’s the new engine behind how people search the internet, you could just imagine how things could go sideways pretty fast, especially when you’re looking up information about subjects rife with misinformation, like elections.”

Within this speculative discussion, ChatGPT remains much of a mystery. And while some policies were enacted to mitigate the influence of hallucinations in political topics, “it remains to be seen how effectively the company will enforce these policies during the 2024 elections” (C233). In this case, US Senators were “also concerned about the disinformation that AI bots could create in the run-up to the 2024 presidential election, and the biases of different algorithms (C226). Sam Altman himself was quoted saying in response to these “doomsday fears over AI” hallucinations (C226): “Given we are facing an election next year this is a significant area of concern” (C203).

As discussed in the literature review, scholars indeed stress that the increasing availability of and accessibility to generative AI applications lead to misuse through false information. The coupling of false and misleading information of not-fully-realized technology with the ability to spread said information rapidly online with minimal human intervention underscores the vulnerability of the political arena (Chesney and Citron, 2019; Schia and Gjesvik, 2020; Simchon et al., 2023). The fear manifested in journalistic coverage is thus not simply that information is inaccurate, but rather that consuming inaccurate information about politics without the ability to distinguish it from accurate information, ultimately alters behaviors.

Thus, “Artificial intelligence will be transformative in ways we can’t even imagine, with implications for Americans’ elections” (C198). In this scenario, misinformed users populate a misinformed political realm, all in light of unregulated use of ChatGPT. Journalists argue that “any AI application that could influence people’s voting decisions at local, national or European polls is considered at risk, together with any system that supports democratic processes such as counting votes” (A88). As part of this line of speculation, Politico writers ask, “How much will AI influence the 2024 election?”

(C289). They continue: “Chatbots are very good at simulating human speech and writing. . . to sway people’s opinions in the 2024 election cycle.” In this sense “it could be used to target undecided voters in an election cycle. . . provide inaccurate information to voters about the election itself.” To support this notion, journalists quoted Altman’s own statement on the topic: “It’s one of my areas of greatest concerns – the more general capability of these models to manipulate, to persuade, to provide sort of one-on-one disinformation (C289).”

Human agency and the machine. The fear of the machine does not end at voting and elections. While these are important in and of themselves, the narrative journalists construct about a potential negative impact goes one step further into the future. In many accounts news coverage stressed the loss of agency, where machines will be equal to, even supersede human beings’ abilities as a whole (e.g. A1, A8, B98, and B100), and in politics in particular (e.g. A69, B96, B103, C205, and C214).

The Guardian (B112) for example, quoted “Godfather of AI” Geoffrey Hinton, where he feared a general impact of politics. Hinton was presented as “concerned about the ‘existential risk of what happens when these things get more intelligent than us. . . people will not be able to discern what is true anymore with AI-generated photos, videos and text flooding the internet’.” The Telegraph reported that “A version of ChatGPT deployed in Microsoft’s Bing search engine told journalists earlier this year that it wanted to break free and steal nuclear codes, before its responses were toned down by the company” (C226). The abilities of the machine in this narrative will be greater than human, where “the average person will not be able to know what is true anymore” (B115).

“The idea that this stuff could actually get smarter than people – a few people believed that,” Hinton was quoted saying (B103). He added: “But most people thought it was way off. And I thought it was way off. I thought it was 30 to 50 years or even longer away. Obviously, I no longer think that.” And even if not as fatalistic as complete loss of agency and grasp of reality, even more subtle accounts hint for a seemingly crucial technological point in time. “The Terminator franchise was based on the premise that AI systems might gain awareness and decide to defend themselves by getting rid of humans,” learned the readers of the Public Service Broadcaster RTÉ (B117). “While this idea still seems to be a stretch, there is disturbing evidence that the distinction between AI and human intelligence might be shrinking,” they continued (B117).

These futuristic narratives matter. The mainstream accounts of post-humanist condition posit that humans will no longer possess a defining characteristic of our existence – the ability to develop and control technology. Indeed, it is established that a fair amount of news items refer to future events in coverage of emerging technologies (Brennen et al., 2022; Jaworski, et al., 2003). And while in the case of other AI applications this rhetoric helped journalists to establish a renewed sense of need for journalism and journalistic knowledge framing practices (Wahl-Jorgensen and Carlson, 2021; Yadlin-Segal and, 2021), this was not the case with ChatGPT.

In the coverage of ChatGPT, the complicating action of post-humanist society and political future served as a base for a resolution, an urgent call for AI regulation and moderation. Journalists pointed at tech companies (e.g. A1, A17, A20, B96, B104, and B129) and states or international, global collaborations (e.g. B131, C191, C192, C203,

C205, C222, C233, and C250) as responsible for enacting curbing measures for the potentially devastating outcomes of using ChatGPT in politics.

Yet, within this journalistic discourse of the future, news outlets constructed a narrative ultimately leading to a speculated future. With some benchmarks in the near future, such as the 2024 elections, press vocabularies and imageries presented dramatic events, related to an unknown future, involving intangible menace. Similar to the findings of past studies, these conjectured future narratives tend to involve worst case scenarios as a whole, and of Frankenstein's monster/runaway science in the context of AI in particular (Neiger, 2007; Obozintsev, 2018).

Some scholars recognize that representations of the future play a key role in social action (Flichy, 2007) as with journalists' calls to regulate ChatGPT found in this study. But the case of AI narratives leading to a conjectured future begs further critique. As Neiger (2007) shows, conjectured future narratives featured in news coverage may lead to "democracy without citizens" (Entman, 1989 in Neiger, 2007). Society thus "becomes an environment in which rational, well-informed citizens vanish from the public sphere, and their place is taken by emotional media consumers" (Neiger, 2007, p. 319). And if journalists' main argument in ChatGPT coverage is losing a hold on reality through disinformation and greater-than-human-ability type of information circulation, then it appears that journalists might create the same effect in society through constantly reporting on a conjectured future.

Given that citizens still consume most of their information online from reliable news sources (Altay et al., 2022), we suggest that not only machines might create a reality with little attachments to facts, but also the press. The construction of post-humanist runaway technology narratives creates uninformed readership with more myths than actual, usable nudge toward policy, regulation, and moderation. The conjectured type of information is of little use to individuals, and from a normative viewpoint, these seemingly reliable journalistic sources might partake in creating the problem they urge to solve. This, as we show in the following section, is also constructed through narratives of humans exploiting the great power of the ChatGPT machine.

Fear of human actors in the political realm

Similar to the narrative of fearing the machine, global news outlets constructed a simultaneous second narrative of fear. In this second narrative, writers ponder the future fostered by humans exploiting the powerful abilities and influence of ChatGPT. If the first narrative feared the machine being stronger than humanity, in this second narrative human actors maliciously exploit the unregulated technology to gain political international power.

As such, news sources maintained that "With ChatGPT, almost anyone can. . . become a threat actor" (A82). "In the national security space, it will be and probably is being used extensively" Fox News argued, adding: "As a society we have shown a propensity toward using new tools for what most would term 'evil' – the manipulation of thoughts and behaviors to reach a desired end for a particular group or entity" (B114). Journalists informed readers that when it comes to the political realm "Some of the

dangers of AI chatbots were quite scary” (B112). Namely these “scary” scenarios were attributed to foreign “bad actors” who would try to use AI for “bad things” (B147).

News outlets also warned readers that ChatGPT “could become more intelligent than humans and could be exploited by ‘bad actors’” (B112), adding that “It’s able to produce lots of text automatically so you can get lots of very effective spambots. It will allow authoritarian leaders to manipulate their electorates, things like that.” In this line of thought, the audience was invited to “imagine, for example, some bad actor like [Russian President Vladimir] Putin decided to give robots the ability to create their own sub-goals” (B96). As the BBC alerted its readership: “This eventually might create sub-goals like ‘I need to get more power’” (B111).

ChatGPT and international blocks of power. And thus, in much of the reporting, Russia and Vladimir Putin became points of reference to the potential detrimental impact of ChatGPT on world politics (e.g. C199, C204, C222, C229, and C232). In a similar manner to the first narrative (fear of the machines), we again see references to a conjectured future in politics. As such, “unscrupulous world leaders like Vladimir Putin – would sooner or later unleash a dangerous AI onto the world” (B106). Ultimately, this means that humans freed an extremely destructive and powerful tool into society, where AI as a whole, and ChatGPT in particular, can pass on what they’ve learned instantly. “It’s as if you had 10,000 people and whenever one person learnt something, everybody automatically knew it. And that’s how these chatbots can know so much more than any one person” (B106).

“What if I had asked it, and what if it had provided, an endorsement of Ukraine surrendering or (Russian President) Vladimir Putin’s leadership?” asked Senator Richard Blumenthal in the May 16th Senate hearing with Altman (e.g. C23 and C294). “That. . . would’ve been really frightening,” he concluded (C290). “It is hard to see how you can prevent the bad actors from using it for bad things,” journalists finalized the discussion (B109), stressing that “This is just a kind of worst-case scenario, kind of a nightmare scenario” (B111).

Yet, in the narrative of bad human actors harnessing the power of ChatGPT to gain power in the international political arena, Russia was not alone. In journalistic imagining of the conjectured political global future of “what if” and “would have been,” China became an additional “bad” political actor in the coverage of ChatGPT. In this China-oriented sub-narrative, journalists and their sources conflate technological pursuit with political-ideological orders, producing a blurred construction of fear. The Washington Post (C192), for example, discussed the US approach to countering China in the AI race. They reported: “senators stressed the importance of tackling the threats posed by AI in a way that upholds American values of openness, partly as a foil to China’s own stringent crackdown” (C192), adding that while China is reining in AI “to make sure that it reinforces the core values of their political system,” input should be also made on how to “promote AI that reinforces or strengthens our commitment to open societies, open markets and democracy.”

Similarly, the New York Times (C287) covered the Senate ChatGPT hearing held with Altman, suggesting that “subcommittee members also showed a reluctance to clamp down too strongly on an industry with great economic promise for the United States and

that competes directly with adversaries such as China.” They elaborated: “The Chinese are creating A.I. that ‘reinforce the core values of the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese system’, said Chris Coons, Democrat of Delaware. ‘And I’m concerned about how we promote A.I. that reinforces and strengthens open markets, open societies and democracy.’” The Los Angeles Times reported that “Lawmakers questioned the potential for dangerous disinformation and the biases inherent in AI models trained on internet content” and added: “They raised the risks that AI-fabricated content poses for the democratic process, while also fretting that global adversaries like China could surpass U.S. capabilities” (C193).

Journalistic production of a techno-moral framework of legitimacy. Granted, many of these worst-case scenarios are developed by journalists through quotes by leading figures in tech and politics rather than particular journalistic commentary. Altman and Hinton were extensively quoted in the corpus alongside Senators Richard Blumenthal, Chris Coons and other Senate subcommittee members, AI experts, and AI policymakers. As Ferree et al. (2002) argue in this context: “By including quotations and paraphrases from various spokespersons, journalists decide which collective actors should be taken seriously as important players” (p. 12). But constructing this narrative of the future through paraphrases and quotations does not merely indicate who the important players are. Through the merge of political ideology and technology this narrative also provides readers a techno-moral framework of legitimacy that is supported by the authority of leading figures in high-tech and politics.

Within this political framework, journalists construct narratives in which technological use is associated with ideology. Democracy and freedom are associated with technological regulation and fairness of use. Authoritarian regimes are respectively associated in press coverage with evil, unethical gain of power through abuse of technology. In this sense, news coverage, once again, becomes a ritual. This dichotomy is constructed while mostly ignoring, or reminding only in passing, the fact that the malicious use of AI in politics was well established in the US (e.g. in the case of Cambridge Analytica). In fact, even the framing of the discussion through the binary of the printing press and the atomic bomb (e.g. C193, C234, and C253) echoes the readily-made frame that might be very useful for journalists, blurring not only the future (as seen in the first narrative), but also the past.

With the introduction of a new technology, it seems that the need to stabilize social experiences “in the new world,” as Carey (1989) described them, “had to be accomplished with resources carried from elsewhere” (p. 2). This “elsewhere” was not a physical location, but a conceptual one, the dichotomy between the “right use of technology” and the “wrong use of technology” as a reflection of a long-standing political rift. As such, regulating the digital frontier while making sense of a new world fostered by technology, is being done by utilizing the dichotomy of “good” and “evil,” of “democratic” and “authoritarian.”

This coverage habit, a “structure of thought that seem[s] characteristic of our age” (Carey, 1989, p. 2), means that the journalistic framing of any communication revolution becomes a ritual for exploring society’s hopes and exaggerated fears of the media, simultaneously representing and reconstructing the values and morals accepted in a society over and over again. This priming device enhances the value of covering an event, a

point in time, that might be extremely technical – a new convoluted technology is introduced, and journalists need to make sense of it to audiences that might not be technologically savvy or hold digital literacy. The standards by which issues in society are being judged depend, to a large extent, on the associations and references to existing socio-political frames made by the media (Iyengar and Kinder, 2010). Thus, the two narratives of ChatGPT in the global press – post-humanist fear of the machine and fear of human use of technology – mean both a professional practice of sense-making for the audience, and the ritualistic sketching of the acceptable, legitimate boundaries of a moral, correct society.

Conclusions

This study examined press coverage of ChatGPT through interpretive narrative analysis of news items published in peak reporting days over a full year, starting from the day ChatGPT platform was inaugurated in November 2022 up to October 2023. Based on the findings we argue that global news media did not properly address its imperative role in fostering a well-informed readership. Throughout the article, we have discussed the journalistic construction of two narratives resulting from two main clusters of fear in journalistic writing about the political realm: Fear of the machine and fear of human actors.

The first narrative of fear, fear of the machine, clustered around discussions of the potent, even greater-than-human power of the ChatGPT machine in the political realm. The fear manifested in this narrative was built around a process in which consuming imprecise political information about politics without the ability to distinguish it from accurate information ultimately alters behaviors. This alteration works up to the point of losing human agency to the ChatGPT machine.

The second narrative of fear, fear of political human actors, clustered around discussions of the malicious illiberal use of ChatGPT by authoritarian “bad actors” in the international landscape. Journalists contemplated a future fostered by humans exploiting the powerful abilities of an unregulated technology to gain political international power, postulating a digital frontier in need of regulation. As part of this narrative, Russia and China became two dominant international-political references for imagining a “right use of technology” and a “wrong use of technology” as a reflection of a long-standing political rift of global blocks of power.

Indeed, scholars such as Simon et al. (2023) argue that concerns over the effects of generative AI, such as ChatGPT, on the information landscape are overblown. These concerns, they contest, “are part of an old and broad family of moral panics surrounding new technologies” (n.p.). Even if these claims and fears are overblown, they do exist in large proportion in global coverage, and necessitate attention and explanation. In our data corpus, news outlets constructed narratives ultimately leading to a negative technologically conjectured future (Neiger, 2007; Obozintsev, 2018). And if journalists’ main argument in ChatGPT coverage was about losing a hold on political reality due to ill-informed citizens, then it appears that journalists might create the same effect in society through constantly reporting on a conjectured future.

Yet, this techno-moral framework, instead of producing well-informed citizens and policy-makers aware of a need for regulation, constructs a hollow democracy, a

democracy of reference with little substance, or a “democracy without citizens” as Entman (1989 in Neiger, 2007) argued. Through the analysis of ChatGPT coverage, we argue that this democratic techno-moral framework might serve as a destruction in a misinformed media landscape more than any actual nudge toward regulation and informed use of technology in society. In this sense, global news media have failed to fulfil its normative role in democratic societies.

Circling back to the concept of technological imaginary, elaborated on in the literature review, our analysis shows that imaginaries of AI neither correspond with the utopian portrayals of “ordinary” new technologies (Ferrari, 2020) nor are dominated by technology companies’ interests (Mager and Katzenbach, 2021). It may be too early to know what shapes current imaginaries of AI technologies. Still, it is reasonable to assume that their equivocal, mostly gloomy portrayals result, at least partly, from their swift emergence and adoption, and the spontaneous responses they spark.

The main limitation of this study is the focus on outlets in the English language. A future study will benefit from a varied corpus of languages that reflect different cultures and audiences. In addition, the qualitative approach presented here could be further developed using computational data analysis tools to address the full-year corpus and locate repetitions supporting our findings. Moreover, as this study reflects on the role of the press in representing and constructing public discourses on ChatGPT, a comparative analysis regarding the ways other groups in society, such as parliamentary policymakers or online media users, may illuminate ChatGPT’s distinctive traits, as discussed in society.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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