AI Public Opinion Tracker

AI Assistants Are Rewriting Communication, Trust, and Work

Wave 4 (Winter 2025-2026)

UNIVERSITY OF
South Carolina

UNIVERSITY OF
South Carolina

College of Information
and Communications

AI Public Opinion Tracker at USC

AI Assistants Are Rewriting Communication, Trust, and Work

WAVE 4 FINDINGS / WINTER 2025-2026

Table of Contents

Foreword by

Tom Reichert, Ph.D.
Dean, College of Information and Communications

"

Navigating the Shift in Communication and Trust

We are at an acceleration moment: generative AI is no longer an experiment at the margins but a core infrastructure of daily life. In 2024, our college initiated the **AI Public Opinion Tracker**, a longitudinal research effort documenting how Americans perceive and use these technologies. With the release of Wave 4 (December 2025), the data point to a pivotal moment for communication careers—one that demands immediate, evidence-based adaptation in how we educate.

The findings show a society in transition and increasingly polarized. Nearly half of Americans now use AI for work or study, yet a persistent trust gap remains: 66% of the public report low confidence in these tools. For students and professionals, the challenge is no longer job displacement, but skill pressure—the need to remain competitive as AI becomes a default gateway to news, information, and content creation.

Our decision to keep these datasets open reflects a core belief that transparency and shared inquiry are essential to maintaining integrity and ethical practice. Institutions like the University of South Carolina must use this evidence to narrow the divide between those who engage AI confidently and those who remain cautious or excluded. By confronting these shifts directly, we equip our faculty and students to lead with clarity and integrity as the boundaries between human authorship and AI assistance continue to evolve.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Acceleration Moment: AI assistants are no longer experimental tools in communication - they are becoming invisible co-authors, filters and credibility cues.

This report presents the fourth wave of data from the AI Public Opinion Tracker, based on a nationally representative survey of the U.S. adult population, conducted as part of a research initiative led by the College of Information and Communications at the University of South Carolina. Wave 4 marks a transition point in public interaction with AI assistants. Unlike earlier surveys, where adoption and curiosity were still emerging, the current data capture a moment of normalization. Generative AI tools are no longer perceived primarily as experimental technologies but as embedded elements of everyday communication, work and information-seeking. This acceleration is not driven by novelty, but by routinization.

One of the most striking findings of this research is the speed of AI adoption. In just a few years, nearly half of the U.S. adult population is already using AI tools for work, study or communication-related tasks. This pace of diffusion is historically unusual. It far exceeds the early adoption rates of previous transformative technologies, including the internet and mobile phones, which required much longer to reach comparable levels of penetration. AI's rapid uptake reflects not only technological maturity, but also its immediate utility across everyday communication practices. The data suggest that AI is not being adopted gradually or cautiously, but absorbed rapidly into daily routines, signaling a technological shift.

Ten Signals that Mark a Structural Shift in Public Opinion on AI

1. **AI has moved from experimentation to infrastructure.**
   Over half of U.S. adults now use AI tools for work or study, confirming that AI assistants are no longer peripheral technologies. AI is increasingly treated as a default layer of interaction, not as an optional add-on.
2. **AI is becoming a major gateway to news and information!**
   A growing share of the public now uses AI assistants to search for news and information, positioning AI alongside - or in place of - search engines and traditional news discovery paths. For many users, AI is becoming the first point of contact with the information ecosystem.
3. **The relaunch of Gemini reshaped the AI brand landscape in 2025.**
   The reinvention of Gemini marked the first clear shift away from ChatGPT's near-monopoly. While ChatGPT remains dominant, online search trends and survey data show plateauing interest, alongside growing adoption of alternative AI brands.
4. **Productivity gains are no longer hypothetical.**
   Nearly 80% of users report that AI improves their productivity, while the share reporting negative effects has fallen to the margins (this is signaling practical, not speculative, value).

The first four signals describe a public that is rapidly normalizing AI. However, normalization does not imply uniform understanding or critical engagement. To interpret what this shift means for public judgment and

information risk, we created the AI Exposure Index (a composite measure that captures how acceptance, confidence and risk perception move together as AI becomes embedded in daily life). More details about this Index – on page 48.

5. **Trust in AI rivals trust in legacy institutions.**
   AI tools now attract levels of confidence comparable to major news organizations, and online platforms - entering an already fragile trust ecosystem.
6. **Public concern is dominated by the fear of job loss.**
   Anxiety is increasingly centered on the need to acquire new skills and stay competitive, but the main pressure is due to job replacement.
7. **Non-use of AI is increasingly driven by distrust, not access.**
   Lack of trust has doubled over the past year as a stated reason for avoiding AI, making it the fastest-growing barrier to adoption. As access barriers decline, skepticism and concern - rather than technical exclusion - are becoming the primary drivers of non-use.
8. **Mis/disinformation fears coexist with growing reliance on AI.**
   Many respondents believe AI both helps people find accurate information and increases misinformation - revealing a persistent tension between utility and epistemic risk. This apparent contradiction reflects a persistent tension between utility and epistemic risk - AI is seen as both a solution and a problem within the information ecosystem.

*Our AI Exposure Index helps explain this tension. Rather than signaling confusion, it reveals **a polarized structure**: almost half of the public integrates AI with high confidence and minimized risk perception, while the other remains cautious and risk-aware. These orientations coexist within the same information environment, producing divergent judgments about trust, reliability and responsibility.*

9 **The public is ambivalent regarding AI impact on journalism.**
   AI is perceived as mostly influencing journalism for the better, and more people have strong opinions about it. At the same time, a dominant majority believe replacement of journalists by AI would lower quality and would increase polarization.
10 **The public is unequivocal about transparency: AI use must be disclosed!**
   A clear majority of Americans believe news organizations should be required to disclose when AI is used to produce or edit content. Transparency is no longer a preference; it is a public expectation and a legitimacy threshold.

Closing signal. Read together, these signals point to a communication environment undergoing structural change. AI is not simply being adopted; it is being normalized in ways that amplify both efficiency and vulnerability. Our AI Exposure Index (page 48) provides a framework for understanding where confidence enables innovation - and where it may quietly turn into risk.

![College of Information and Communications — UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA]

The Big Picture

From Awareness to Conditional Authority

Over the past five years, global interest in artificial intelligence has shifted from gradual awareness to intense, tool-driven attention. This change accelerated sharply after the public release of ChatGPT, which quickly surpassed searches for "artificial intelligence" itself and became the dominant reference point for AI worldwide. From that moment on, public attention increasingly centered on specific AI assistants rather than on AI as an abstract technology.
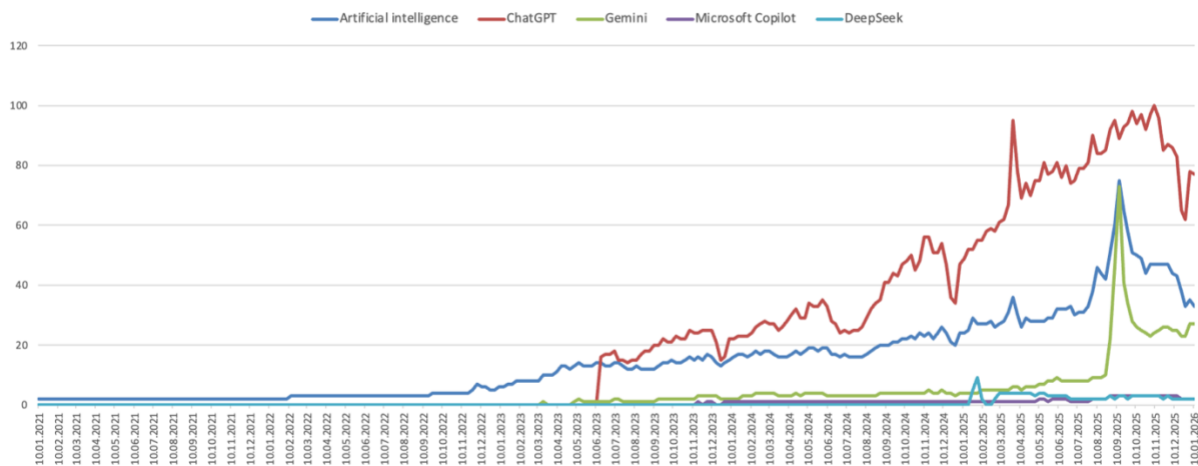

Figure 1. The evolution of search interest related to AI and AI tools. Source: Google Trends, worldwide

More recently, search interest shows **signs of stabilization and even decline**. Over the past months, global searches for ChatGPT and other AI tools have dipped from their peak levels, suggesting a move from novelty-driven curiosity to more routine, normalized engagement. Other assistants, such as Gemini and Microsoft Copilot, generated short-lived spikes around launches, but none has sustained yet long-term visibility comparable to ChatGPT.

AI has become a shared reference point in American public life. Awareness is now nearly universal: **96%** of respondents report having heard about artificial intelligence in general, and **90%** are familiar with specific AI tools such as ChatGPT. AI is no longer an emerging technology on the margins of public attention; it is part of the everyday communication landscape. This broad familiarity has translated into widespread, but selective, use. **52%** of Americans say they have used AI tools for work, study, or both. Fewer, however, report using AI assistants to create communication content (**41%**).

AI familiarity is high, trust lags behind usage and awareness

■ Yes ■ No

	Yes	No
Heard about AI, in general	96%	4%
Heard about AI tools, like ChatGPT	90%	10%
Used AI tools for work, study or both	52%	48%
Used AI tools to create communication content	41%	59%
Trust in AI	34%	66%

Figure 2. Public awareness, usage and trust in AI tools measured across five variables. Source: AI Public Opinion Tracker at USC, Wave 4, Dec. 2025

Yet, trust lags behind use. Only about one third of the public (**34%**) say they have high or very high confidence in AI tools, illustrating a gap between familiarity, adoption and trust, which captures the defining tension of the current moment.

Together, these indicators point to **a system in transition**. Generative AI assistants are no longer novel, but they are not yet fully legitimized as communicative actors. How people navigate this tension shapes their expectations about work, information, journalism, as well as democracy.

Before Results: How We Read Differences Across Professions

As in previous waves of the AI Public Opinion Tracker, this report analyzes public attitudes toward AI not only across standard socio-demographic variables, but also across **broad occupational groupings**, referred to as *super-industries*. This approach reflects the assumption that AI is experienced differently depending on the nature of one's work, the centrality of communication tasks, and proximity to automation or AI-assisted processes.

Respondents were grouped into a small number of analytically meaningful categories capturing structural differences rather than specific job titles. These include **communication and creative industries** (such as art, media, marketing, and entertainment), **knowledge-based and technical professions** (including technology, education, research, finance, and consulting), **human-centered professions** (such as healthcare, government, non-profit and care-oriented roles), and a broader category of **manual, production & service work** (retail, hospitality, industry, agriculture etc) with lower direct exposure to AI-assisted communication.

Professional "super-groups"

Figure 3. Percentage distribution of survey respondents across five professional categories. Question used for the segmentation: Which industry do you work in or are preparing to work in?

This segmentation is used throughout the report to identify systematic differences in AI adoption, trust, perceived benefits, as well as concerns. In many cases, variation across occupational groups is as pronounced as differences associated with age or education. The purpose of this framework is not to predict individual behavior, but to highlight how **structural position within the communication and labor ecosystem** shapes how AI is encountered, evaluated and integrated into everyday practice. Unless otherwise specified, references to professional or industry-based differences in the report draw on this super-industry framework, alongside standard socio-demographic controls.

From Tool to System

Public awareness of artificial intelligence has consolidated rapidly, but this consolidation is not evenly distributed across technologies. While general familiarity with AI has increased steadily, the trajectory of ChatGPT awareness reveals a more pronounced shift from vague recognition to high familiarity. Over the last two years, the share of respondents who report having heard "a lot" or "a great deal" about ChatGPT has nearly doubled, while the proportion of those entirely unfamiliar with the tool has declined to a marginal level. Those working in **creative** work or **knowledge** work have heard a great deal about AI much more than the average (58%, compared with our average of 42%).

For many respondents, "AI" is no longer a distant or technical concept but is concretely associated with a specific, named assistant used to generate text. In this sense, ChatGPT functions as a cognitive anchor for how AI is evaluated, and discussed in everyday life - particularly in communication-related contexts such as writing and information seeking. This narrowing of reference points has important implications. As general AI awareness stabilizes, familiarity with a dominant AI assistant continues to deepen, shaping expectations about what AI can do and how it should behave. Rather than encountering AI as a diverse ecosystem of tools, many users engage with it through a single, recognizable interface, which increasingly stands in for "AI" as such.

While awareness of AI in general has stabilized, familiarity with ChatGPT continues to intensify - indicating a shift from abstract knowledge to tool-based understanding.

Public familiarity with AI tools continues to deepen

How much have you heard or read about AI?
— Heard a lot & a great deal — Heard a little or moderate — Not at all

How much have you heard about ChatGPT, an artificial intelligence (AI) tool used to create text?
— A great deal & a lot — A moderate amount & little — Not at all
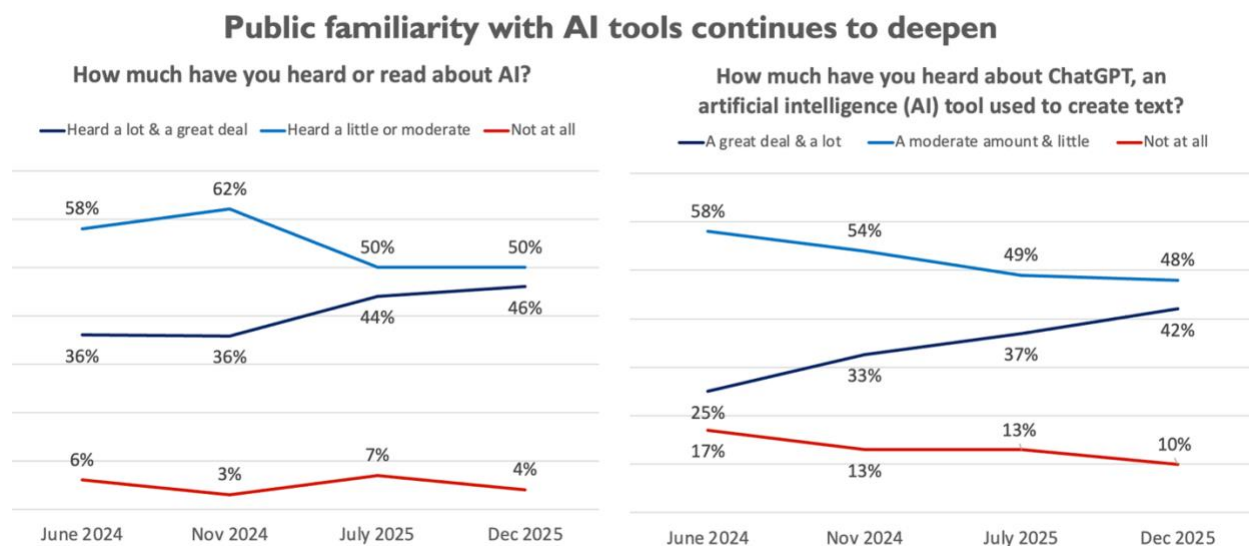
Figure 4. Evolution of self-reported awareness of AI (left) and ChatGPT(right) from mid-2024 to late 2025. Source: AI Public Opinion Tracker at USC, Waves 1-4

This dynamic reinforces the role of AI assistants not merely as tools, but as de facto standards through which communication practices, trust judgments, but also concerns about societal impact are formed.

Viewed side by side, public attitudes toward science and artificial intelligence reveal two fundamentally different trust trajectories. Science continues to benefit from deep, stable legitimacy: across all waves, roughly three quarters of respondents consistently describe its impact on society as positive, while negative views remain marginal and largely unchanged. Even where slight fluctuations appear, they do not challenge science's position as a broadly trusted and institutionally anchored domain. Artificial intelligence, by contrast, occupies a far more dynamic and unsettled position.
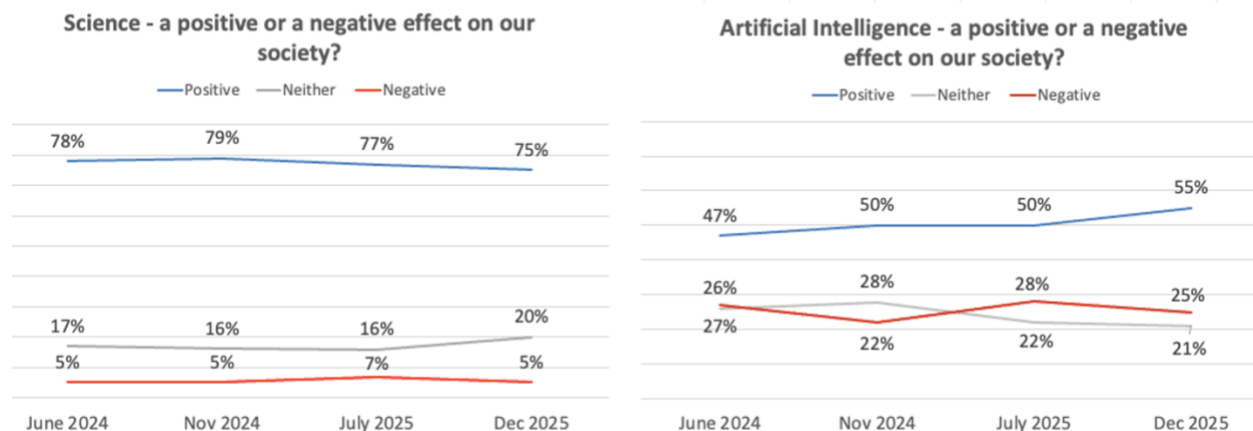

Figure 5. Public sentiment trends regarding the positive or negative effect of science (left) and artificial intelligence (right) on society. Source: AI Public Opinion Tracker at USC, Waves 1-4

Although positive evaluations of AI have increased over time - reaching a majority by December 2025 - this growth has not been accompanied by a comparable decline in concern. Negative views persist at a meaningful level, and neutrality continues to shrink, indicating that opinions about AI are still being actively formed rather than inherited.

Its legitimacy is not yet stabilized, but is instead shaped by everyday interaction with tools, platforms and communication practices. In this sense, AI has not (yet) become "science-like" in the public imagination.

Negative expectations about AI are more prevalent among those working in manual and service occupations, as well as in human-centric fields, while those employed in knowledge-based industries tend to perceive AI's impact as more positive.

A society in motion: emerging polarization and unresolved tensions

Our data reveal a growing polarization in attitudes toward AI that closely aligns with occupational and industry divides.

- On one side are respondents working in knowledge-based and creative industries, who tend to be more optimistic, closer to AI adoption, and more likely to integrate AI into their professional and informational practices, expressing confidence in its potential benefits.

- On the other side are individuals employed in manual, service, and human-centric occupations, who are more likely to hold pessimistic views, associate AI with negative societal impact, and express concerns related to job security, misinformation, privacy, and democratic processes.

Barriers to adoption overlap and reinforce one another - lack of trust, perceived complexity, skills gaps, and ethical concerns intertwine rather than acting independently. This fluidity indicates that public opinion on AI remains **in formation**, not yet stabilized. What is unfolding is best understood as a broader social transformation - an ongoing, highly visible reconfiguration of work, communication, and authority. The United States, given its early adoption and deep integration of AI tools, stands at the forefront of this process.

AI USED FOR WORK OR STUDY

PART I. AI AS A COMMUNICATION INFRASTRUCTURE

From Tool to Default

How AI Assistants Become Embedded in Communication Work and Study

The use of AI assistants for work and study has crossed a threshold. By December 2025, a majority of U.S. adults (52%) report having used ChatGPT or similar tools for professional or academic purposes, either for work, study, or both. Use of AI tools for work or study is 16–17 percentage points above the sample average among respondents employed in creative and knowledge-based industries. This marks a shift from experimentation to routine exposure, with the share of non-users falling steadily over time.

The longitudinal pattern highlights how adoption has broadened rather than simply intensified. Early use was concentrated in single contexts - primarily work or study - but over time, combined use has increased, signaling that **AI assistants are becoming embedded across multiple domains of daily activity**. At the same time, nearly half of the public still reports no use, underscoring that entry into the AI infrastructure is substantial but not yet universal.

Non-users of AI assistants become the minority as adoption accelerates
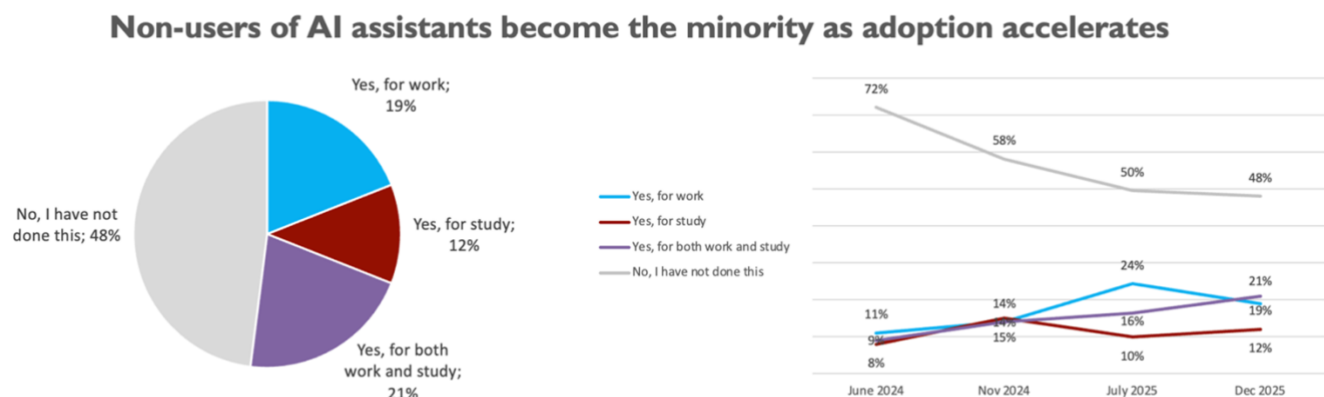
Figure 6. AI assistants - current usage segmentation (left) and the eighteen-month trend (right) showing the rapid decline of non-users. Survey question: Have you ever used ChatGPT or other AI assistants to help with your work or study?

These trends indicate that AI assistants have become a familiar and practical resource for a large segment of the population. Use for work and study now functions as the baseline condition for understanding subsequent differences in communication practices, professional experiences, and attitudes toward AI's broader impact.

What are the Predictors of AI use?

A regression model indicates that AI use is strongly driven by digital engagement and normative acceptance. **Frequent consumption of digital news and higher social media engagement significantly increase the likelihood of using ChatGPT or similar tools**. Positive emotional responses to AI and acceptance of AI for creative and content-related tasks are among the strongest predictors.
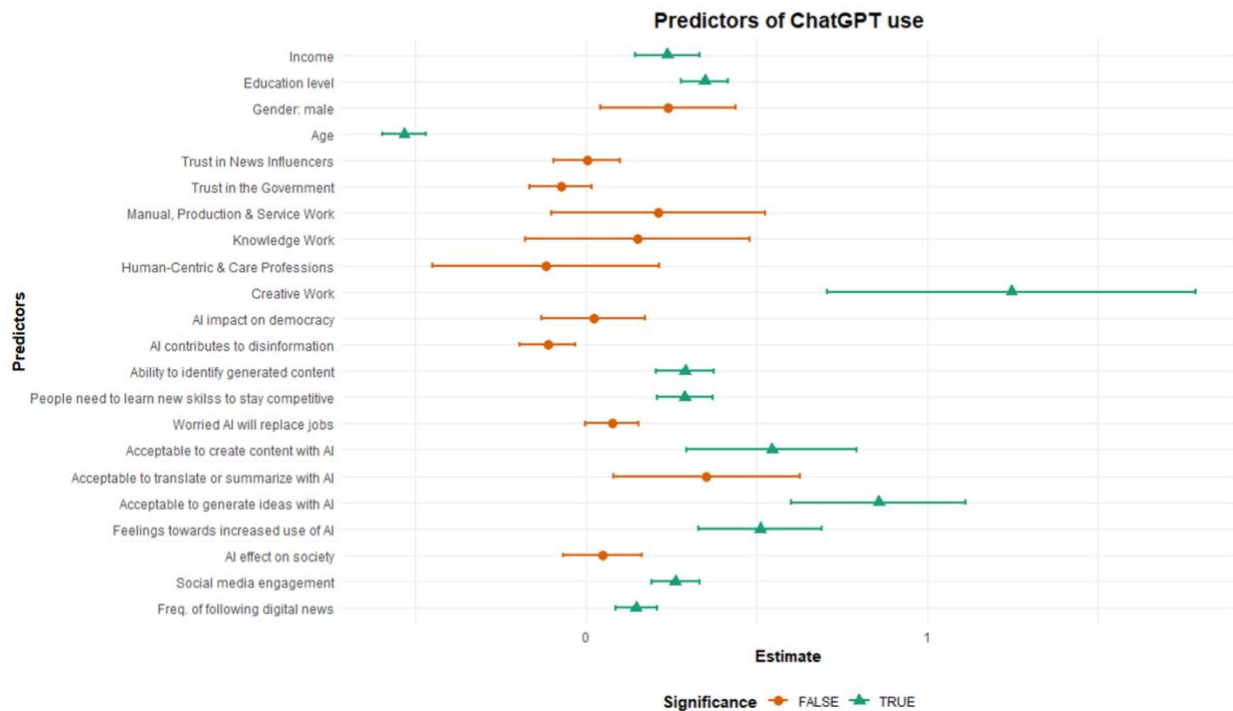

Figure 7. Regression model identifying the demographic and professional factors that predict ChatGPT usage

Importantly, fear-based narratives do not inhibit adoption! Concerns about AI replacing jobs, disinformation, or democratic impact show no significant effect. Instead, users appear pragmatic: **those who believe continuous skill acquisition is necessary and who feel capable of identifying AI-generated content are more likely to adopt AI tools**.

Occupational and demographic patterns further reinforce this profile. Individuals in creative professions, younger respondents, and those with higher education and income levels are significantly more likely to use AI assistants.

Why some people still do not use AI assistants

Among respondents who say they have not used AI assistants for work or study, the main barrier is not access or cost, but trust! Nearly half now cite it as the most important reason for non-use, up sharply from roughly one quarter a year ago! **This makes distrust the fastest-growing obstacle to adoption**.
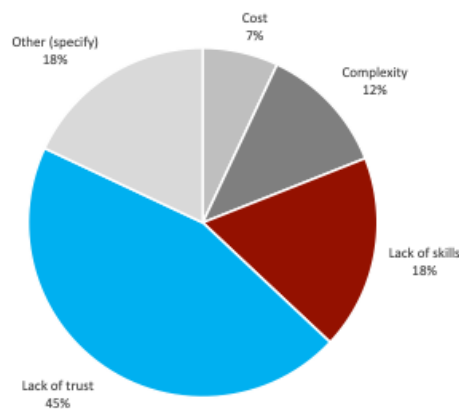
Figure 8. The main self-reported obstacles to adopting AI technology. N=504 (those who did not use AI tools)

Concerns related to skills and complexity have also intensified lately. The share of non-users who say they lack the skills needed to use AI tools has roughly doubled over the past year, while perceived complexity has increased from a marginal concern to a more noticeable one.
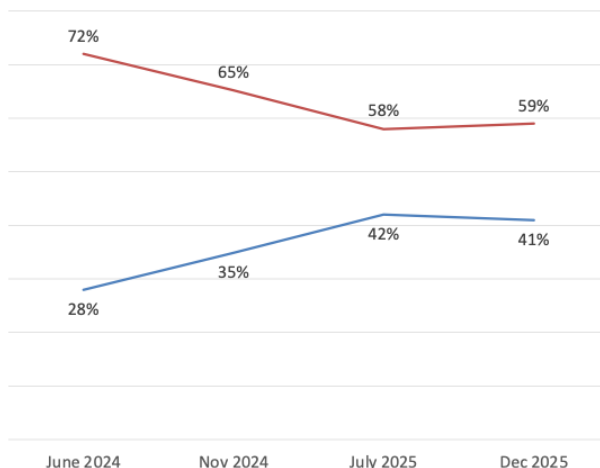
Low trust in AI is pronounced among those working in human-centric and care occupations, where AI tools are often perceived as overly complex. Similarly, respondents employed in service and manual labor roles frequently cite lack of trust as a key reason for not using AI tools.

By contrast, access-related barriers remain secondary. Together, these shifts indicate that non-use is becoming less about exposure and more about confidence.

Communication-specific use: where adoption slows

While the use of AI assistants for work and study has become relatively widespread, their adoption for creating communication content follows a more cautious trajectory. Between June 2024 and December 2025, the share of respondents who report using AI tools for communication tasks increased steadily, rising from 28% to over 40%. Even as familiarity with AI grows, many users remain selective about allowing these tools to intervene directly in communicative output.

Figure 9. Timeline tracking the percentage of users employing AI assistants specifically for creating communication materials. Source: AI Public Opinion Tracker at USC, Waves 1-4

How AI assistants are used in communication. New functions

Use of AI assistants for creating communication content is regular, but not constant. While a small core of users relies on AI daily or several times a week, most report more occasional use. For the majority, AI assistants function as an on-demand resource rather than a permanent presence in daily communication workflows.

How often do you use an AI assistant for creating content (like texts or images)?

Figure 10. Use of AI tools for communication content

The types of tasks for which AI is used clarify this pattern. Adoption is strongest at the early and intermediate stages of communication, particularly for generating ideas and organizing information.

Notably, searching for news or information now ranks among the most common uses. Its high uptake suggests that AI assistants are increasingly used not only to create content, but also to replace traditional search engines, including Google, as entry points to news and information.

At the same time, the share of users relying on AI for summarizing links or longer texts has declined. This shift coincides with the integration of summarization features directly into Google Search through Gemini, indicating that some AI-assisted tasks are being absorbed into existing platforms rather than performed explicitly through standalone assistants.

We are noticing a reconfiguration of communication practices. AI assistants are most often used as cognitive shortcuts - to explore ideas, retrieve information, and structure content - while more advanced or final-stage tasks remain less common.

This selective, task-based integration reinforces the view of AI as a supportive layer in communication, rather than a continuous or fully autonomous author.

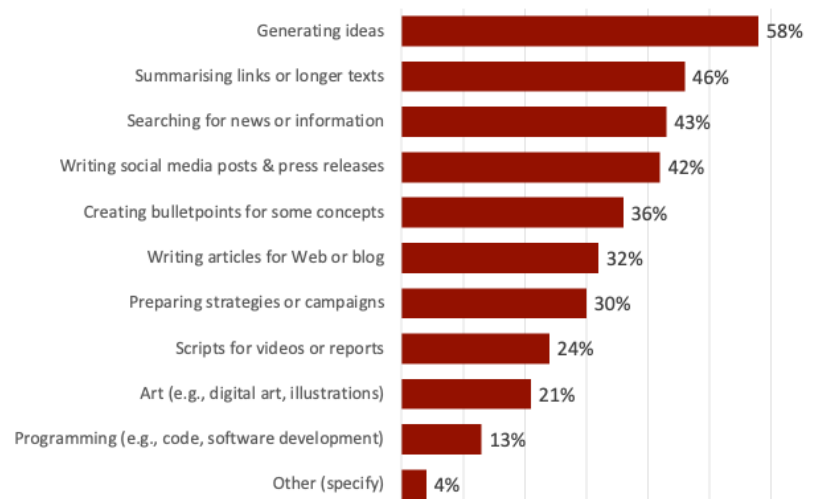**What types of communication-related tasks do you use ChatGPT or other AI assistants for?**

Figure 11. Main tasks for AI tools. N=429, people ussing AI tools for communication content

Limits and blind spots of AI assistance

A substantial share of users report no challenges at all when integrating AI assistants into their work or study. This absence of criticism is notable, suggesting that for many, AI use has become smooth, routine, and largely unproblematic.

Where concerns do emerge, they point less to rejection than to **the need for human oversight**. The most frequently cited issues relate to correcting AI outputs, handling complex requests, and managing hallucinations - limitations that require user judgment rather than technical disengagement. Issues of reliability and privacy are present but secondary, while ethical concerns remain marginal.

These patterns reinforce a central dynamic of AI-assisted labor: most users experience AI as broadly functional, but not autonomous.

Its effectiveness depends on active human intervention, positioning AI as a collaborator that still requires supervision rather than a system that can be left to operate independently.

Have you faced any of the following challenges in integrating AI into your work or study?

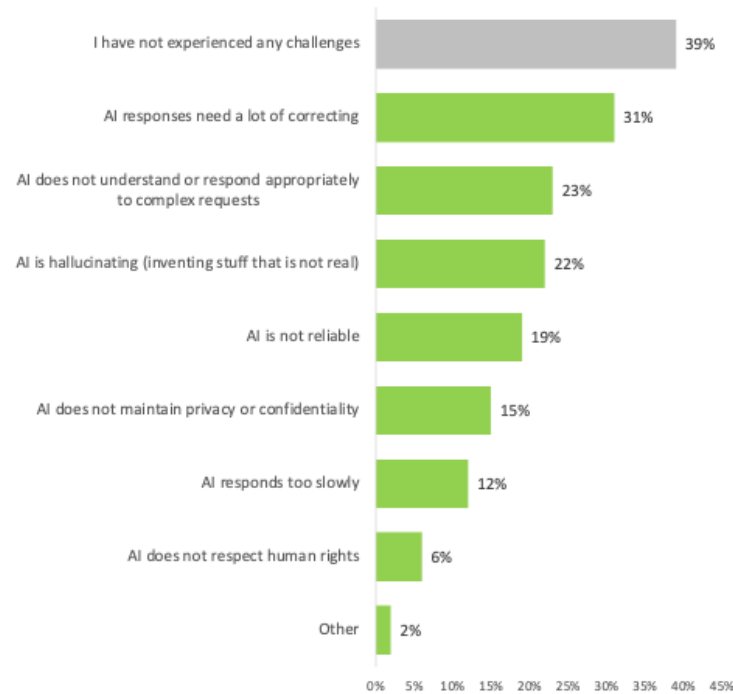| Challenge	Percentage
I have not experienced any challenges	39%
AI responses need a lot of correcting	31%
AI does not understand or respond appropriately to complex requests	23%
AI is hallucinating (inventing stuff that is not real)	22%
AI is not reliable	19%
AI does not maintain privacy or confidentiality	15%
AI responds too slowly	12%
AI does not respect human rights	6%
Other	2%

Figure 12. Breakdown of reported challenges faced when integrating AI into work or study workflows, ranked by prevalence. N=547 respondents (those who are using AI for work or study)

AI is seen as useful, but only within clearly defined limits

How effective do you find AI assistants in aiding your content creation process for communication tasks?

■ Dec 2025 ■ Nov 2024

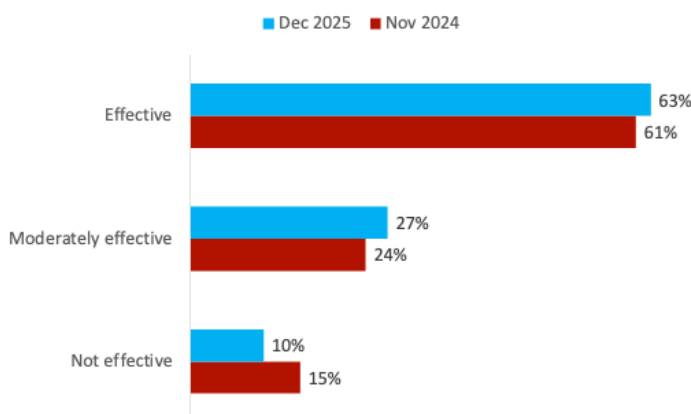|	Dec 2025	Nov 2024
Effective	63%	61%
Moderately effective	27%	24%
Not effective	10%	15%

Figure 13. Perceived effectiveness of AI assistants for content creation tasks, comparison between November 2024 and December 2025. Source: AI Public Opinion Tracker at USC, Waves 2 and 4. For Wave 4, N=429

Beyond patterns of use, respondents largely perceive AI assistants as effective tools for communication-related content creation. Nearly two thirds say AI is effective in supporting their communication tasks, a share that has increased slightly since late 2024.
Perceived efficiency benefits of AI are significantly higher among respondents employed in knowledge-based industries than among other occupational groups.

At the same time, the proportion of users who consider AI ineffective has declined, suggesting growing confidence among those who actively engage with these tools. This

assessment aligns with the way AI assistants are currently used. Respondents tend to rely on AI where it delivers immediate and visible gains (such as ideation, information retrieval or drafting support) rather than for tasks requiring final judgment or accountability. Effectiveness, in this sense, is evaluated pragmatically: **AI is seen as useful when it saves time or helps users move past initial barriers in the communication process**.

Use remains selective and task-specific. This combination helps explain why AI assistants have become embedded in communication workflows without becoming fully automated substitutes for human authorship.

These perceptions of effectiveness set the stage for understanding platform choice. When users decide which AI assistant to rely on, they do so in an environment where AI is already seen as broadly useful - but where differences between platforms can meaningfully shape the quality, reliability, and style of communicative output.

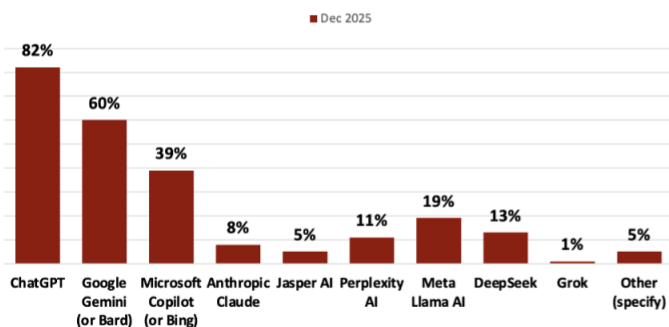## Which AI Assistants People Actually Use - and Why It Matters

Among Americans who use AI assistants, usage is highly concentrated around a small number of platforms. ChatGPT dominates the ecosystem, used by more than eight in ten AI users. Google Gemini follows at a clear distance, while Microsoft Copilot occupies a lower but stable position. All other tools - Claude, Perplexity, Meta Llama, DeepSeek, and others - remain niche, each used by relatively small segments of the AI-using public.

This distribution highlights a strong asymmetry in the AI assistant landscape. Rather than a fragmented or competitive market of interchangeable tools, public use is organized around a limited set of platforms (ChatGPT, Gemini and, maybe, Copilot), with one assistant functioning as the primary gateway to AI-assisted communication. For most users, engaging with AI means engaging with a specific interface, vocabulary, and set of defaults - conditions that shape how AI is experienced in practice.
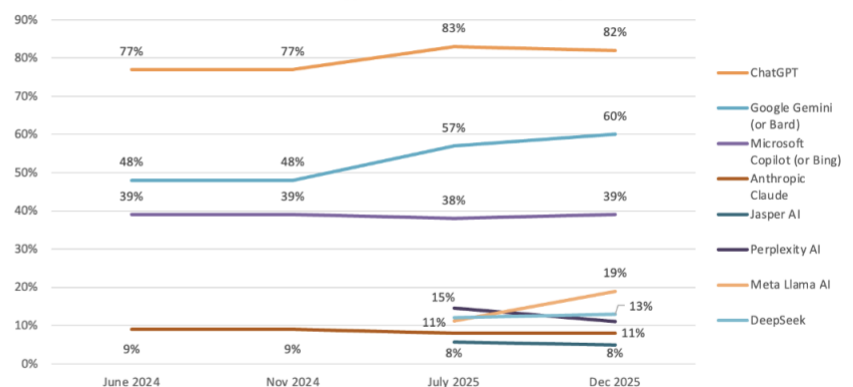
Respondents in creative and knowledge-based industries display above-average adoption across AI tool types, with over 90% having used ChatGPT; creative workers are more likely to use Gemini, while knowledge workers show higher usage of Llama and Copilot.

ChatGPT continues to lead as Google Gemini gains ground

Which type of AI assistant have you used? (Select all that apply). % from those who used AI assistants — Dec 2025: ChatGPT 82%, Google Gemini (or Bard) 60%, Microsoft Copilot (or Bing) 39%, Anthropic Claude 8%, Jasper AI 5%, Perplexity AI 11%, Meta Llama AI 19%, DeepSeek 13%, Grok 1%, Other (specify) 5%.

Which type of AI assistant have you used? — ChatGPT: June 2024 77%, Nov 2024 77%, July 2025 83%, Dec 2025 82%. Google Gemini (or Bard): June 2024 48%, Nov 2024 48%, July 2025 57%, Dec 2025 60%. Microsoft Copilot (or Bing): June 2024 39%, Nov 2024 39%, July 2025 38%, Dec 2025 39%. Meta Llama AI: Dec 2025 19%. DeepSeek: 13%. Anthropic Claude: June 2024 9%, Nov 2024 9%, July 2025 8%, Dec 2025 8%. 15%, 11%.

Platform dynamics over time: consolidation with a shifting hierarchy

Viewed longitudinally, the data point to consolidation rather than fragmentation, but with an important recent adjustment. ChatGPT has remained the dominant AI assistant across waves, consistently used by around four out of five AI users, confirming its role as the primary reference platform for AI-assisted communication. However, the landscape has begun to shift following the relaunch of Google Gemini last year.

Since its introduction as a more advanced, integrated assistant, Gemini has recorded steady growth in user adoption, narrowing the gap with ChatGPT. This change mirrors broader online attention patterns: while searches related to ChatGPT have largely plateaued in recent months, interest in Gemini has increased, reflecting curiosity around a relaunched brand positioned as a next-generation alternative.

Together, these trends suggest a transition from a single-brand moment to a more competitive - but still concentrated - platform environment. ChatGPT remains the anchor of the ecosystem, but Gemini's rise indicates that dominance is no longer uncontested. Rather than signaling fragmentation, this development points to a recalibration of the AI assistant hierarchy, in which a small number of platforms compete to define standards for AI-assisted communication.

Norms of acceptability: where the line is drawn

Public attitudes toward the professional use of AI assistants reveal a clear hierarchy of acceptability. A strong majority of Americans considers it acceptable for professionals to use AI tools for generating ideas and for translation or summarization tasks. And the numbers are higher as compared with previous waves of measuring.

Strong majority accept AI for translation and idea generation

These uses are widely seen as supportive and preparatory, helping professionals work more efficiently without replacing human judgment or authorship.

Acceptance is smaller, however, when AI is used to create communication content directly. While a majority still views this practice as acceptable, resistance increases noticeably compared to ideation and summarization. This drop signals an implicit boundary: the closer AI moves toward authorship and public-facing output, the more contested its role becomes.
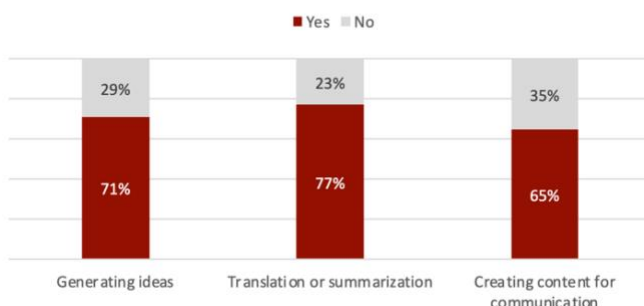
Figure 15. Levels of acceptability for AI use across different professional tasks. Survey question: Do you think it is acceptable for professionals to use ChatGPT or other AI tools for…

These patterns seem to indicate that public norms around AI-assisted communication are not binary but conditional. AI is broadly accepted as a cognitive aid and efficiency tool, yet its legitimacy weakens when it approaches the core expressive functions traditionally associated with professional responsibility. This boundary-setting helps explain why AI adoption in communication remains selective - and why its impact on communication labor is experienced unevenly across roles and tasks.

COMUNICATION LABOR
UNDER AI PRESSURE

PART II. COMMUNICATION LABOR UNDER AI PRESSURE

Communication fields sit at the frontline of AI normalization because they combine productivity, authorship, credibility, and public accountability. Unlike technical domains, communication work is evaluated not only by efficiency but by trust, transparency, and social impact. The data show that AI adoption advances fastest where communication is instrumental (idea generation, information retrieval), and slows where responsibility and public visibility increase (authorship, journalism, democratic discourse). This makes communication a key site where the legitimacy of AI is actively negotiated.

Productivity - from promise to practice

Perceptions of AI-assisted productivity have strengthened markedly over time. By December 2025, four in five respondents who use AI assistants say these tools have improved their productivity at work or in their studies - a substantial increase compared to mid-2024. Over the same period, neutral evaluations have declined, indicating that more users are forming clear judgments based on experience rather than expectation.

Figure 16. Perceived impact of AI assistants on productivity levels over time. Source: AI Public Opinion Tracker at USC, Waves 1-4. For Wave 4, N=547

The share of respondents who report that AI has worsened their productivity is now negligible. What was once a visible minority has shrunk to a marginal group, suggesting that for most users, AI assistance at least does no harm - and for many, delivers tangible gains. These trends signal a shift from speculative optimism to experiential validation. AI assistants are no longer judged primarily on potential, but on observed outcomes. This widespread perception of effectiveness helps explain why AI has become embedded in communication work, even as concerns about trust, quality or long-term implications persist.

How satisfied are you with your experience using these AI assistants?

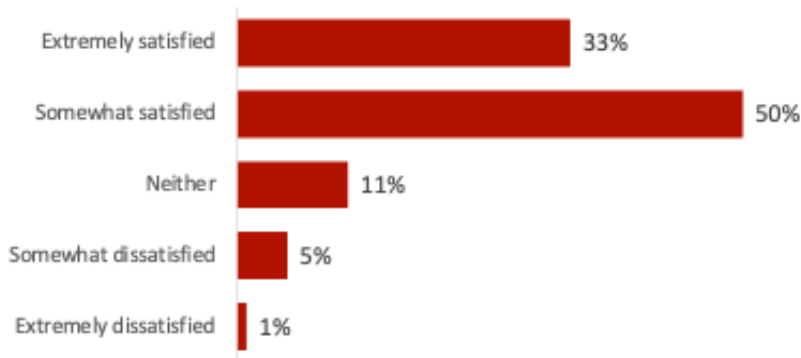|	
Extremely satisfied	33%
Somewhat satisfied	50%
Neither	11%
Somewhat dissatisfied	5%
Extremely dissatisfied	1%

Figure 17. Levels of user satisfaction with AI assistant experience. Wave 4, N=547

User satisfaction with AI assistants is high and broadly distributed. More than eight in ten users report being either extremely or somewhat satisfied with their experience, while dissatisfaction remains marginal. Only a very small share express strong negative views, indicating that for most users, AI assistance meets or exceeds expectations formed through everyday use.

This distribution matters because satisfaction reflects more than momentary gains in productivity. It signals consolidation: users are not only working faster, but are generally comfortable with how AI assistants fit into their routines.

From productivity to confidence: does AI help more than it hurts?

Beyond perceived gains in productivity, public assessments increasingly tilt toward the view that AI assistants do more good than harm in core domains of work and learning. Across recent waves, the share of respondents who say that AI helps more than it hurts has increased modestly but consistently - by several percentage points overall, and even more sharply in the case of finding accurate information online.

AI helps or hurts?

■ AI helps more than it hurts   ■ AI hurts more than it helps

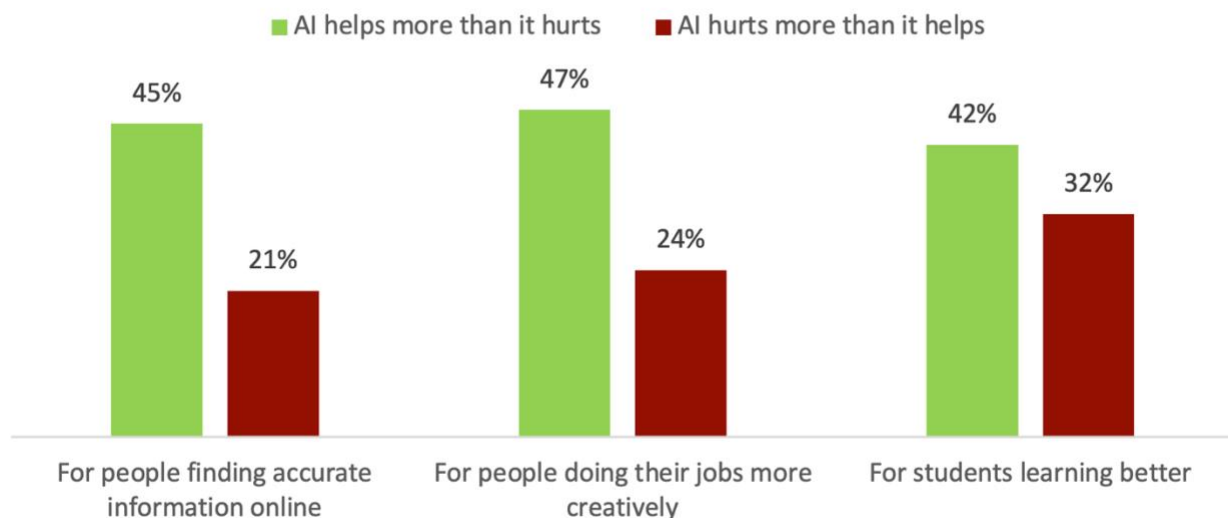|	For people finding accurate information online	For people doing their jobs more creatively	For students learning better
AI helps more than it hurts	45%	47%	42%
AI hurts more than it helps	21%	24%	32%

Figure 18. Comparison of public sentiment on whether AI helps or hurts across information accuracy, creative work, and student learning

This shift is particularly telling. Concerns about accuracy and reliability have long been central to skepticism around AI use. Yet the growing belief that AI improves people's ability to find accurate information suggests that everyday interaction is reshaping expectations. As users become more familiar with AI-assisted search and synthesis, confidence appears to rise alongside competence.

A similar, though slightly less pronounced, pattern emerges in assessments of AI's impact on creativity at work and on student learning. In both cases, positive evaluations outpace negative ones, reinforcing the perception that AI functions primarily as an enabler rather than an obstacle. Importantly, this does not imply the absence of concern, but it does indicate that, for many users, practical experience is outweighing abstract fears.

The dominant response to AI is not fear of replacement, but pressure to keep up

Even as AI assistants are widely perceived as improving productivity, many respondents anticipate growing pressure on communication-related jobs. A majority agree that they need to learn new skills in order to remain competitive in the job market, making adaptation - not replacement - the dominant concern at this stage. This suggests that AI is already reshaping expectations around professional competence and continuous learning.

Concerns about structural inequality are also pronounced. Many respondents believe AI will deepen the gap between tech-skilled and non-tech workers, pointing to fears of uneven access and differential capacity to adapt. By contrast, direct anxiety about personal job replacement is more limited, indicating that while people recognize disruption, they do not yet experience it as an immediate threat to their own employment.
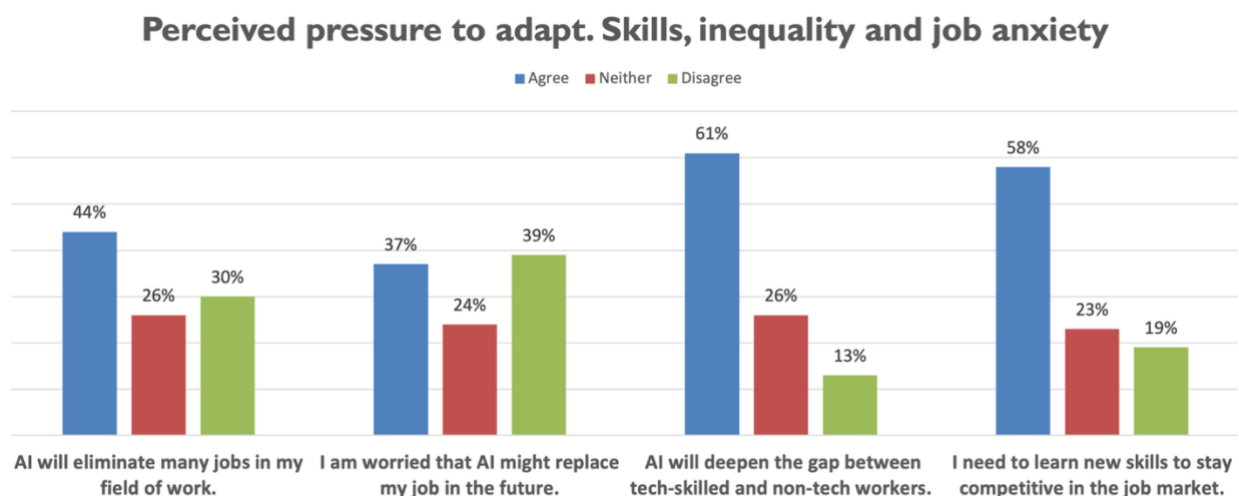

Figure 19. Levels of agreement regarding AI's impact on skills, inequality and job security

When analyzed together, these attitudes reflect a form of anticipatory pressure rather than panic. AI is understood as a force that will reconfigure communication work, demanding new

skills and redefining professional value, even as most workers still see themselves as capable of adapting to the change.

Expected impact on communication jobs: loss, transformation, or creation?

When asked to assess AI's broader impact on jobs in the communication field, public opinion remains ambivalent and dynamic. Across waves, the largest share of respondents expect AI to reduce the number of jobs, making job loss the most common expectation overall. However, this view fluctuates over time rather than intensifying steadily, suggesting uncertainty rather than settled pessimism.

Fear of job loss outweighs transformation hopes
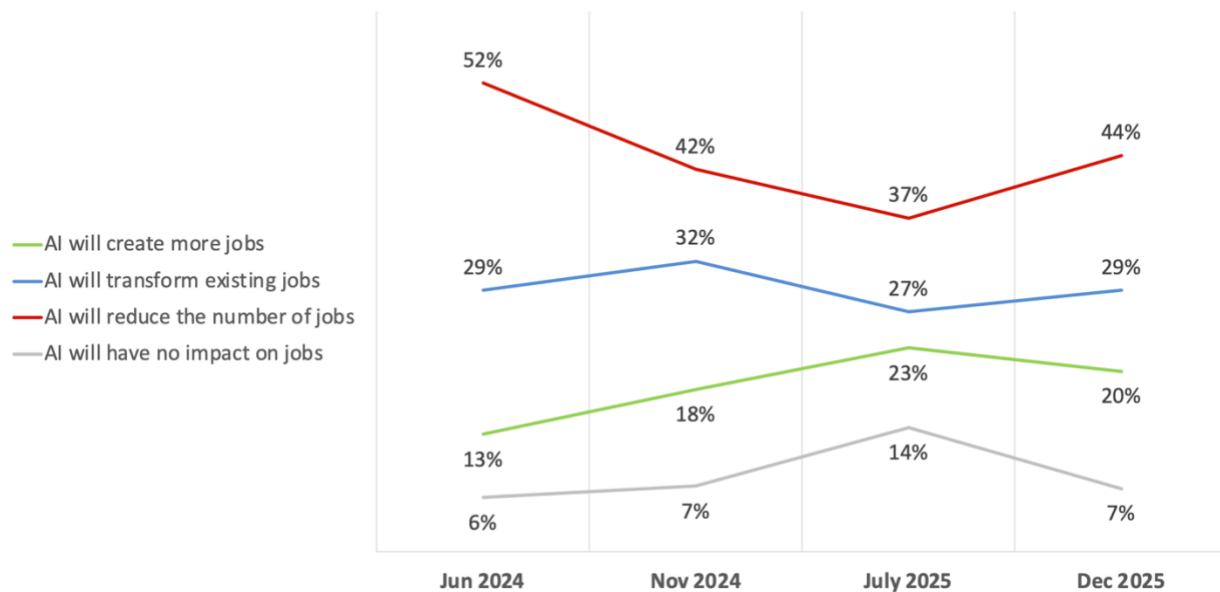

Figure 20. Perception of the impact of AI tools on jobs in the communication field. Source: AI Public Opinion Tracker at USC, Waves 1-4

At the same time, a substantial and stable segment believes AI will transform existing jobs rather than eliminate them. This perspective has remained remarkably consistent across measurement waves, reinforcing the idea that many see AI as a restructuring force - changing roles, workflows, and skill requirements - rather than a purely destructive one. Expectations that AI will create new jobs have grown modestly but remain secondary, while very few respondents believe AI will have no impact at all.

These patterns underline the coexistence of optimism and concern. AI is widely expected to disrupt communication labor, but the nature of that disruption remains contested—balanced between fears of contraction and expectations of transformation.

What can explain the responses here?

The findings of a regression model reveal a moderate but structured pattern of economic anxiety. **Workers in knowledge-intensive occupations are more likely to perceive AI as a threat to employment**, suggesting that proximity to automation-prone tasks heightens perceived vulnerability. In contrast, creative, human-centric, and manual occupations do not display statistically significant differences.

Trust in news influencers is linked to a higher belief that AI will replace jobs
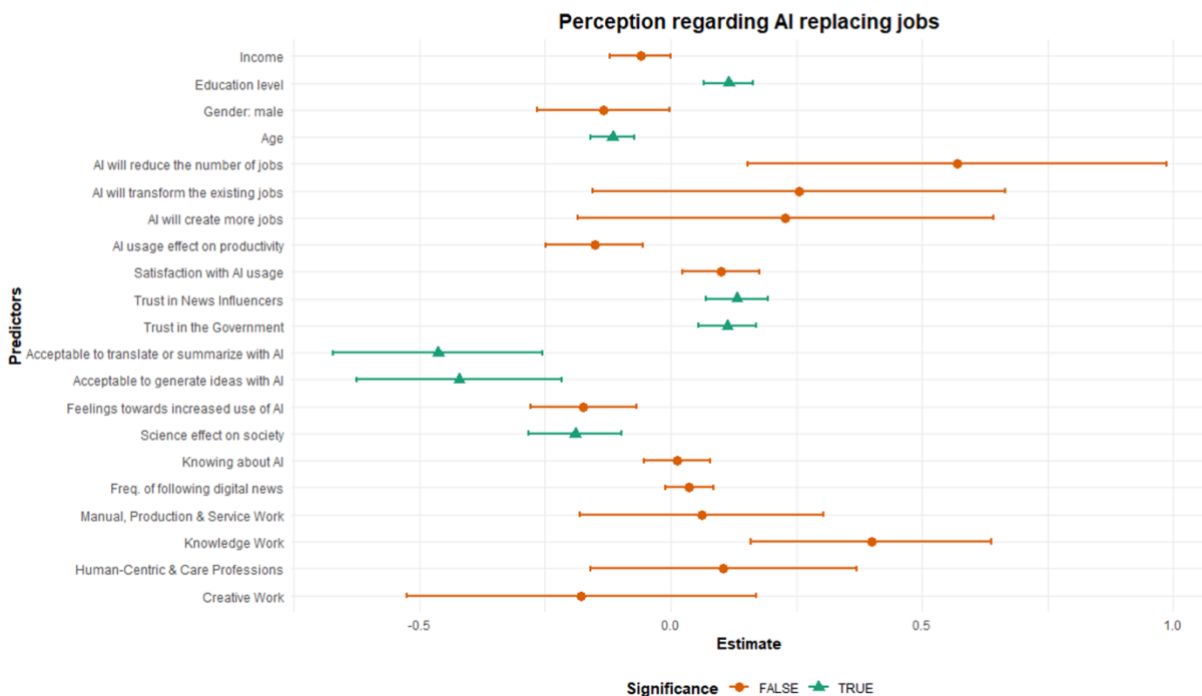

Figure 21. Regression model identifying the demographic and professional factors that predict perception of AI impact on jobs

Attitudinal variables again emerge as decisive. Individuals who view scientific and technological progress positively, and who feel comfortable with the expansion of AI, are significantly less likely to believe AI will replace jobs. Acceptance of AI for concrete tasks - such as idea generation or translation - is also associated with lower job-replacement fears, indicating that practical familiarity reduces perceived threat.

Trust variables operate in the opposite direction. Higher trust in news influencers or in government is associated with greater concern about job loss, possibly reflecting media narratives emphasizing disruption and labor-market adjustment.
Age and education display expected effects: **younger and more educated respondents express greater concern**, suggesting heightened awareness rather than economic precarity per se.

A landscape still in formation

These responses point to a landscape that remains fluid rather than settled. The boundaries between expectations of job loss, transformation and creation are not sharply drawn, indicating that public opinion has not yet crystallized around a single dominant narrative. Instead, Americans appear to be navigating uncertainty, balancing competing possibilities as AI becomes more visible in communication work.

What stands out, however, is the relative absence of dismissal. Only a small minority believe AI will have no impact on jobs in the communication field. By contrast, when combined, the shares of respondents who expect AI to transform existing jobs and those who believe it will create new ones consistently account for roughly half of the public. This stable majority signals broad anticipation of change, even if its precise direction remains unclear.

In this sense, the debate is not whether AI will reshape communication labor, but how. The persistence of uncertainty reflects a technology whose consequences are still unfolding, rather than a public that is disengaged or indifferent.

Why Communication Workers Experience AI Differently

Differences in how communication workers experience AI are shaped less by occupation alone and more by proximity to replaceable tasks, exposure to AI outputs, and perceived control over final decisions. Knowledge-intensive roles show higher sensitivity to disruption, while creative and human-centric roles emphasize AI's supportive value. Perceived agency moderates anxiety: respondents who feel capable of supervising, correcting or contextualizing AI outputs are more likely to frame AI as a collaborator rather than a threat.

INFORMATION AND CREDIBILITY

PART III. INFORMATION AND CREDIBILITY

As AI tools move from supporting communication work to mediating access to information, their role expands from productivity enhancers to credibility actors. Journalism occupies a critical intersection in this transition, where efficiency gains collide with concerns about authorship, accountability and democratic trust. Public attitudes toward AI in journalism therefore offer an early indicator of how far AI legitimacy can extend into public-facing communication.

AI as a news gateway: confidence, use, and uncertainty

Three indicators (from three diferent questions) capture a shift in how the public engages with news in an AI-mediated environment. A substantial share of Americans now rely on AI tools to search for news and information, signaling that AI assistants are no longer peripheral but increasingly function as entry points to the information ecosystem.
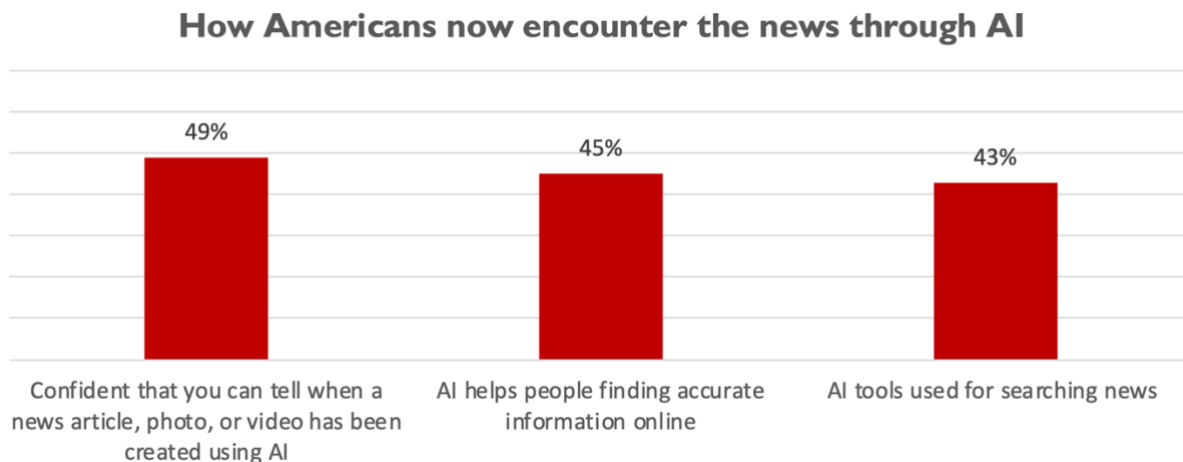

How Americans now encounter the news through AI

- 49% — Confident that you can tell when a news article, photo, or video has been created using AI
- 45% — AI helps people finding accurate information online
- 43% — AI tools used for searching news

Figure 22. Levels of confidence in detecting AI-generated content compared to AI usage habits related to finding news

At the same time, confidence in detecting AI-generated news content is growing. Roughly half of respondents believe they can tell when text, images, or videos have been created using AI, while the rest express uncertainty or lack of confidence. This gap between use and discernment raises questions about how well audiences can evaluate the provenance of the information they consume.

Compounding this tension, many respondents believe AI helps people find accurate information online, reinforcing trust in AI-assisted retrieval even as the ability to independently verify content remains uneven.

Together, these findings point to an emerging paradox: AI is increasingly trusted to guide people toward information, even as confidence in recognizing AI-generated content lags behind.

This combination reshapes the relationship between access, accuracy, and credibility in contemporary news consumption.

Journalism, AI, and the Crisis of Credibility

Public opinion on AI's impact on journalism remains ambivalent but structured. Across measurement waves, a plurality consistently believes AI can improve the quality of journalism, while a substantial minority sees it as a force that could make things worse.

Notably, the share of respondents who see no significant impact is declining, suggesting that **neutrality is giving way to clearer judgments** as AI becomes more visible in news production.

This pattern indicates that journalism is perceived as a domain where AI has real stakes. The debate is not whether AI matters, but whether its influence will be beneficial or harmful.
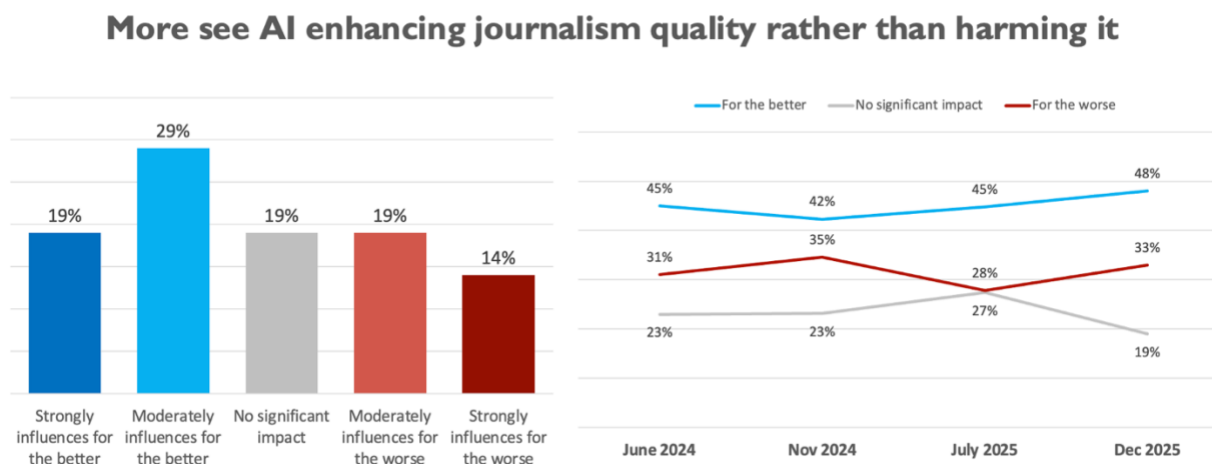

Figure 23. Public sentiment regarding the positive or negative influence of AI on the quality of journalism. Dec. 2025 (left) and trends 2024-2025 (right). Survey question: To what extent do you believe AI can influence the quality of journalism for better or for worse? Source: AI Public Opinion Tracker at USC, Waves 1-4

When asked to assess the strength of AI's impact on journalism, most respondents cluster in the middle of the scale. Moderate optimism outweighs both strong enthusiasm and strong pessimism, reinforcing the idea that expectations are cautious rather than ideological.

AI is seen as capable of improving journalism, but not in a transformative or unproblematic way. This distribution reflects a public that is still calibrating its judgment, balancing potential efficiency gains against concerns over quality, accountability, and editorial standards.

What influences these responses? Predictors about the future of journalism

The strongest positive associations emerge from normative acceptance of AI in journalistic practices. **Respondents who consider it acceptable to use AI for generating ideas and creating content are significantly more likely to view AI as improving journalism**. These effects are not marginal: they stand out as some of the largest coefficients in the model, suggesting that support for AI-enhanced journalism is grounded in practical legitimacy rather than abstract technological optimism. Similarly, individuals who believe AI has a positive effect on society and who express positive feelings toward the increased use of AI consistently perceive AI as enhancing journalistic quality.
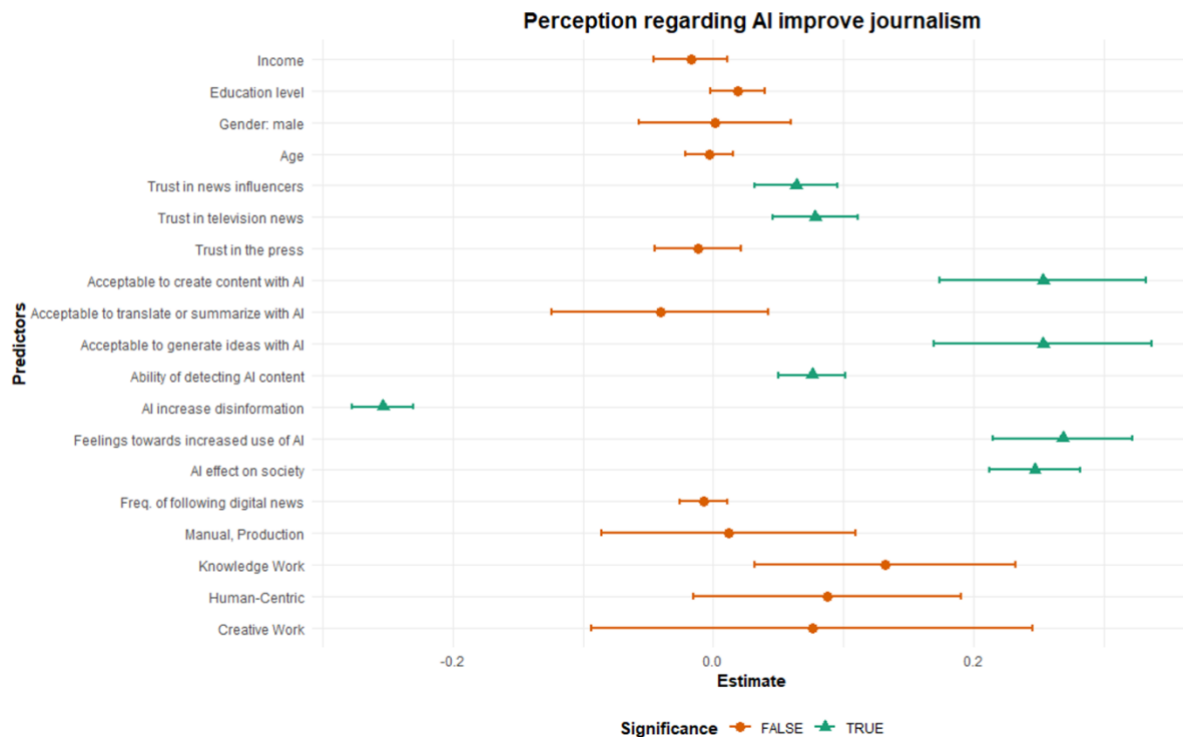

Figure 24. Regression model identifying the factors that predict the belief that AI improves the quality of journalism

Perceived competence and literacy also play an important role. Those who report a higher ability to detect AI-generated content are more inclined to see AI as beneficial for journalism. Trust in media institutions further structures these perceptions. Higher trust in television news and news influencers is positively associated with viewing AI as an improvement for journalism, indicating that institutional confidence may spill over into technological confidence. By contrast, trust in the press as a general institution does not appear to exert a significant independent effect once other factors are controlled for.

Notably, perceptions of AI as a source of increased mis/disinformation are strongly and negatively associated with believing that AI improves journalism. This inverse relationship highlights a central tension in public opinion: **AI is seen either as a tool for journalistic enhancement or as a driver of informational degradation, but rarely both simultaneously**. Occupational variables show limited explanatory power. While respondents engaged in knowledge-intensive, creative, or human-centric work tend to express more positive views, these effects are weaker and often statistically indistinguishable from zero. This suggests that professional exposure alone does not determine optimism, once attitudes and norms are accounted for.

Nearly half of Americans confident in detecting AI news

How confident are you that you can tell when a news article, photo, or video has been created using AI?
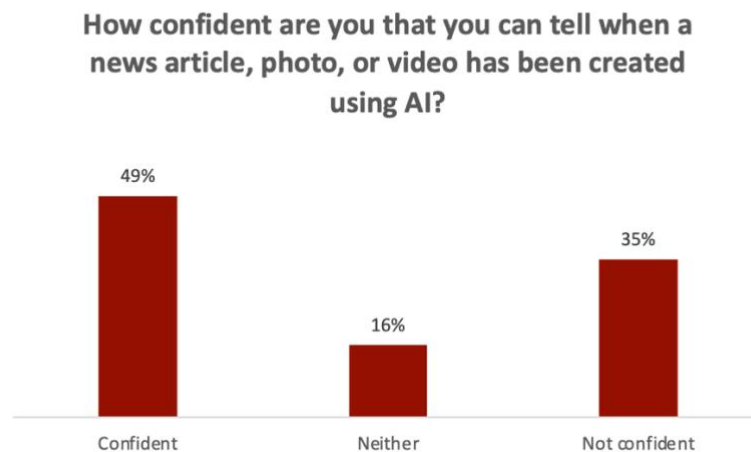

Figure 25. Levels of self-reported confidence in identifying AI-generated news articles, photos, or videos

Confidence in identifying AI-generated news content is deeply divided. While roughly half of respondents say they feel confident, a large minority report uncertainty or lack of confidence. This gap highlights a growing epistemic challenge: even as AI becomes more common, the ability to recognize it does not keep pace. This uncertainty is mirrored in perceptions of news clarity. While some believe AI can make information easier to understand, an almost equally large share expects news to become more confusing or less trustworthy. Together, these findings point to a weakening of traditional cues used to assess credibility.

Public attitudes toward the use of AI in journalism are best understood not as a simple divide between optimism and pessimism, but as a layered negotiation between efficiency, trust and democratic concern.

A clear majority agrees that AI can help journalists work more efficiently, reinforcing earlier findings about productivity and workflow support. This suggests that the public recognizes tangible benefits when AI is positioned as an assistive technology operating under human supervision. Efficiency gains, however, do not translate into trust in AI-generated journalism as such. Nearly half of respondents explicitly reject the idea that they would trust articles written entirely by AI, while only a minority express confidence in their ability to reliably tell whether a news story was written by a human or a machine.
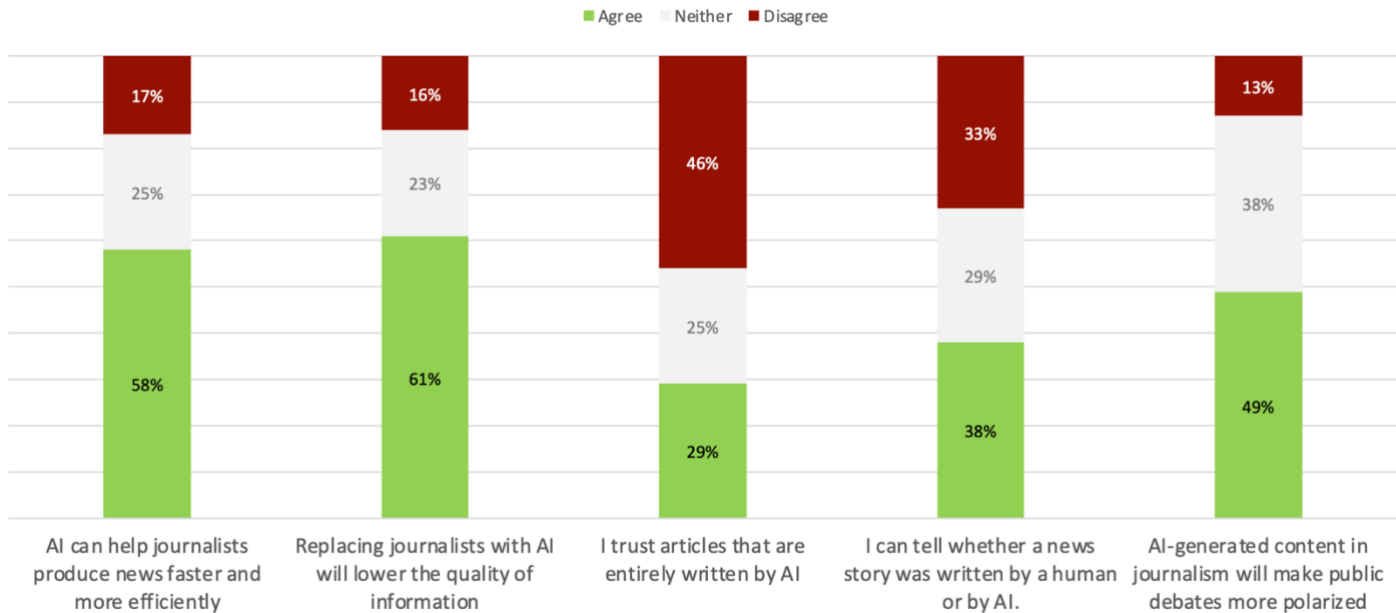

Figure 26. Assessment of public attitudes toward AI in newsrooms, highlighting the tension between operational efficiency and concerns regarding quality, trust and polarization.

This asymmetry reveals a central tension: **AI is accepted as a backstage tool, but not as a frontstage actor**. Human authorship continues to function as a key marker of accountability and credibility, even as audiences acknowledge that AI may already be embedded in journalistic processes. The uncertainty about authorship (combined with limited confidence in detecting AI-generated content) undermines traditional cues used to evaluate news quality and reliability.

Concerns extend beyond individual trust to broader social effects. A substantial share of respondents believe that AI-generated content will make public debates more polarized, suggesting that the perceived risks of AI in journalism are not confined to accuracy alone, but also include amplification, distortion, and the erosion of shared informational ground. This fear aligns with earlier findings on misinformation, reinforcing the view that AI may intensify existing vulnerabilities in the information ecosystem rather than resolve them.

Taken together, these responses point to **a conditional legitimacy model**. The public does not reject AI in journalism outright, nor does it embrace it uncritically. Instead, legitimacy depends on clear human oversight, transparency about AI use, and the preservation of journalistic responsibility. AI is tolerated, and even welcomed, when it strengthens journalistic work, but resisted when it threatens to blur authorship, weaken trust, or destabilize public discourse.

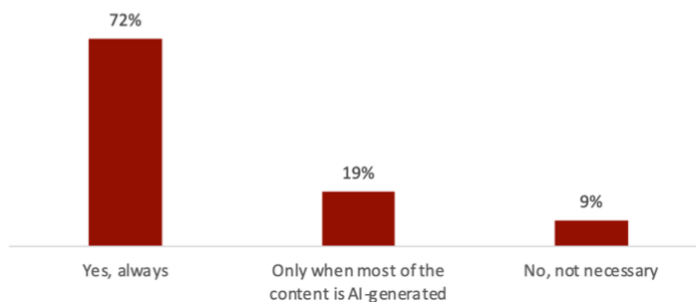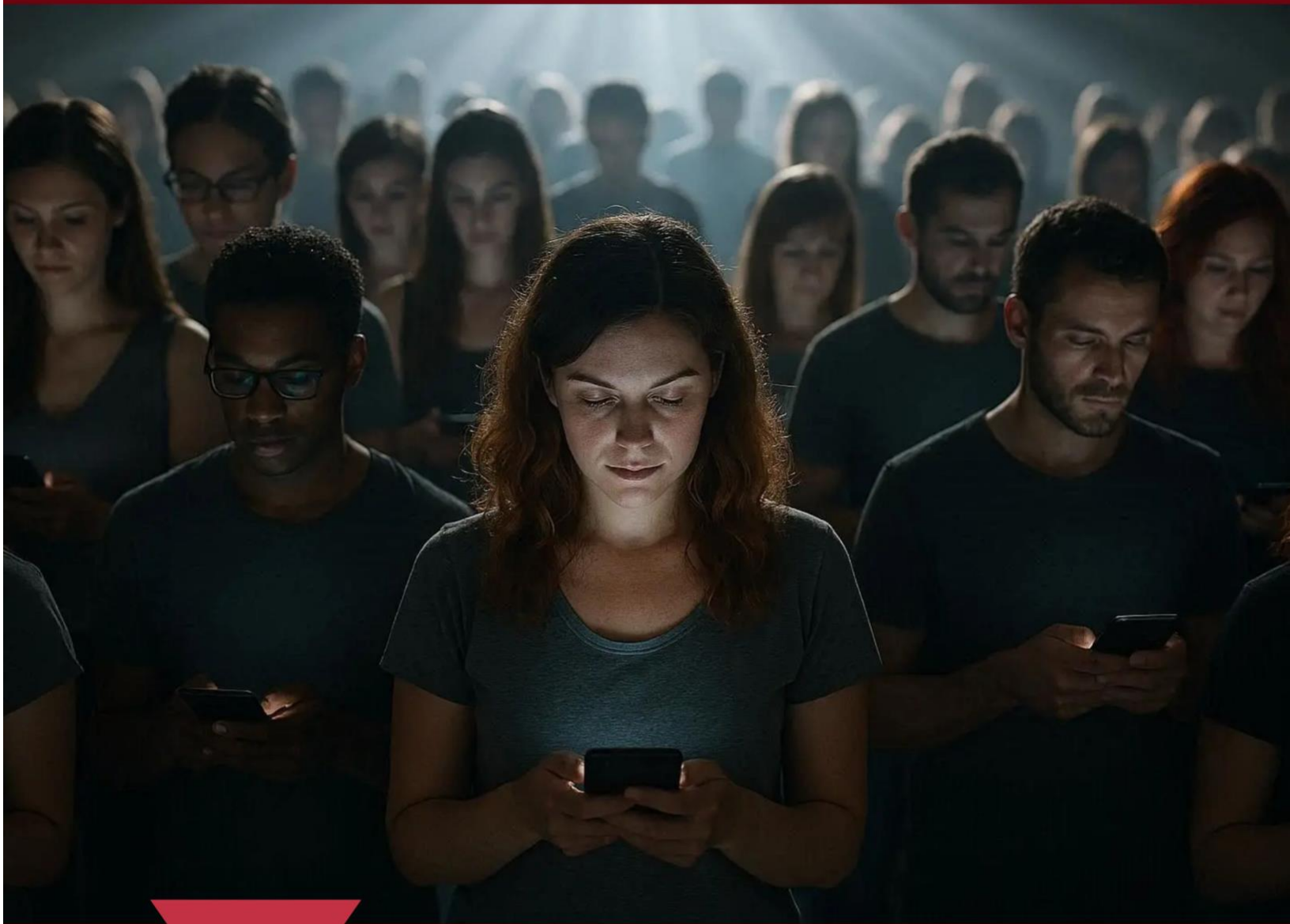## Vast majority demand full disclosure of AI use in news

Figure 27. Public opinion regarding the requirement for news organizations to disclose the use of AI in content production or editing. Survey question: Do you think news organizations should be required to disclose when they use AI to produce or edit content?

Amid uncertainty and mixed expectations, one point of consensus clearly emerges: transparency. An overwhelming majority of respondents believe news organizations should always disclose when AI is used to produce or edit content. Partial disclosure or non-disclosure attracts little support. This demand signals that the public does not reject AI in journalism outright, but insists on visibility and accountability. Disclosure functions as a trust mechanism, compensating for declining confidence in the ability to independently assess content authenticity.

COMMUNICATION, DISINFORMATION, DEMOCRACY & ETHICS

PART IV. COMMUNICATION, DISINFORMATION, DEMOCRACY & ETHICS

Disinformation, in the Age of AI

As AI assistants become embedded in how people find and interpret news, their implications extend beyond journalism and information quality. The growing reliance on AI as a gateway to knowledge, combined with uneven confidence in recognizing AI-generated content, raises broader questions about how citizens form opinions and engage in democratic life.

What begins as a matter of efficiency or convenience increasingly becomes a matter of power and accountability. If AI systems shape what people see, how information is framed and which sources are amplified, their influence reaches into the core processes of public deliberation. Concerns about misinformation, polarization, and transparency therefore cannot be treated as isolated media issues; they intersect directly with democratic norms and ethical responsibilities. This section examines how the public understands these risks, where trust begins to erode, and what safeguards people expect as AI-driven communication becomes a permanent feature of the democratic information environment.

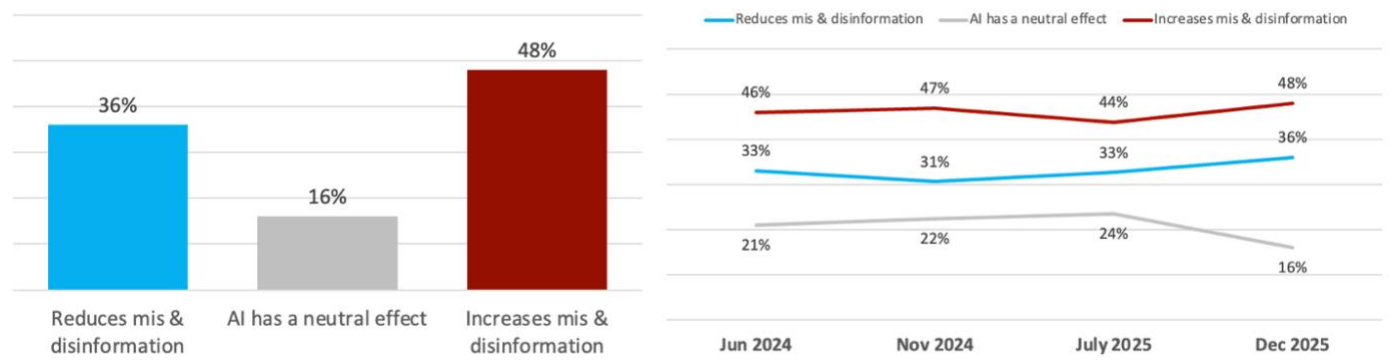### Nearly half believe AI increases online misinformation

Figure 28. Current public sentiment (left) and historical trends (right) regarding the impact of AI on the spread of online misinformation and disinformation. Source: AI Public Opinion Tracker at USC, Waves 1-4

Concerns about misinformation remain central to public perceptions of AI in journalism. Across waves, a growing share of respondents believe AI is more likely to increase misinformation and disinformation than to reduce it. While a meaningful minority sees AI as potentially helpful in countering false information, skepticism dominates.

Importantly, neutral responses continue to shrink, signaling that exposure to AI-generated or AI-assisted content is pushing people toward clearer, often more critical, evaluations of its role in the information ecosystem.

Perceived risks related to misinformation are rarely framed in extreme terms. Instead, most respondents describe AI's impact as somewhat increasing misinformation rather than significantly worsening it, which indicates that concerns are rooted in everyday exposure and

accumulated experience, not in catastrophic expectations. The result is a low-grade but persistent sense of unease, rather than panic - a perception that AI subtly degrades information quality even if it does not fundamentally collapse it.

A regression model. AI effects on mis/disinformation

In this model we can observe that attitudinal and evaluative factors dominate perceptions of AI-driven mis/disinformation, rather than media consumption intensity or basic AI familiarity. **Individuals who perceive AI as having a negative effect on society and who feel uneasy about the increased use of AI are significantly more likely to believe that AI exacerbates mis- & disinformation**. In contrast, more optimistic evaluations of AI's societal role correspond to lower perceived risks.

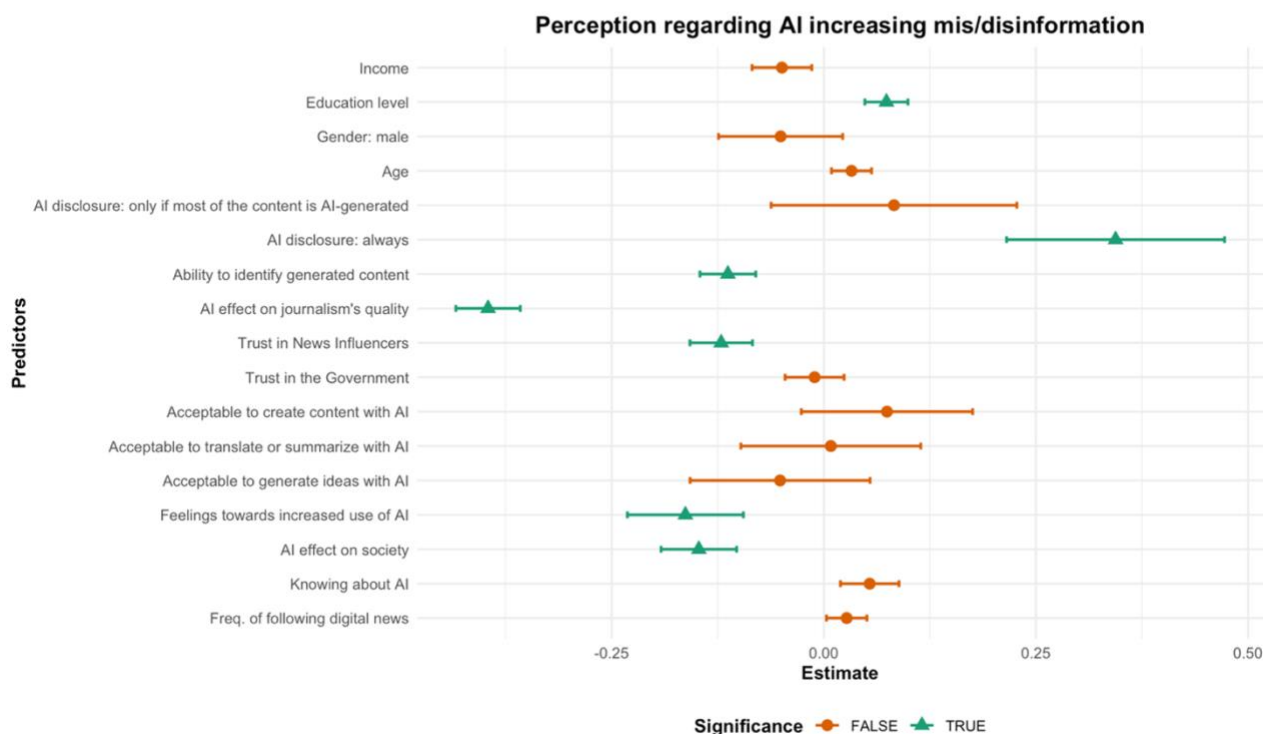**Demand for full AI disclosure is the strongest predictor of misinformation concerns**

Figure 29. Regression model identifying the factors that significantly predict the belief that AI increases misinformation.

Journalism-related perceptions play a central role. Respondents who believe AI improves journalistic quality are substantially less likely to associate AI with mis/disinformation, while those who report higher ability to identify AI-generated content also express lower concern. Trust dynamics further nuance these perceptions. Higher trust in news influencers is associated with lower risk, whereas trust in government shows no significant effect. Support for mandatory AI disclosure ("always disclose") is positively associated with perceiving AI as a

mis/disinformation threat, indicating that regulatory support may stem from heightened risk awareness rather than technological optimism.

Ethics & privacy. Lack of rules and awareness

Despite the growing normalization of AI use, ethical and governance frameworks remain weakly internalized. Most users report not having encountered privacy issues so far, which may reflect limited awareness rather than the absence of risk. At the same time, awareness of ethical guidelines or best practices for AI use remains low and uneven, even after modest gains over the past year.
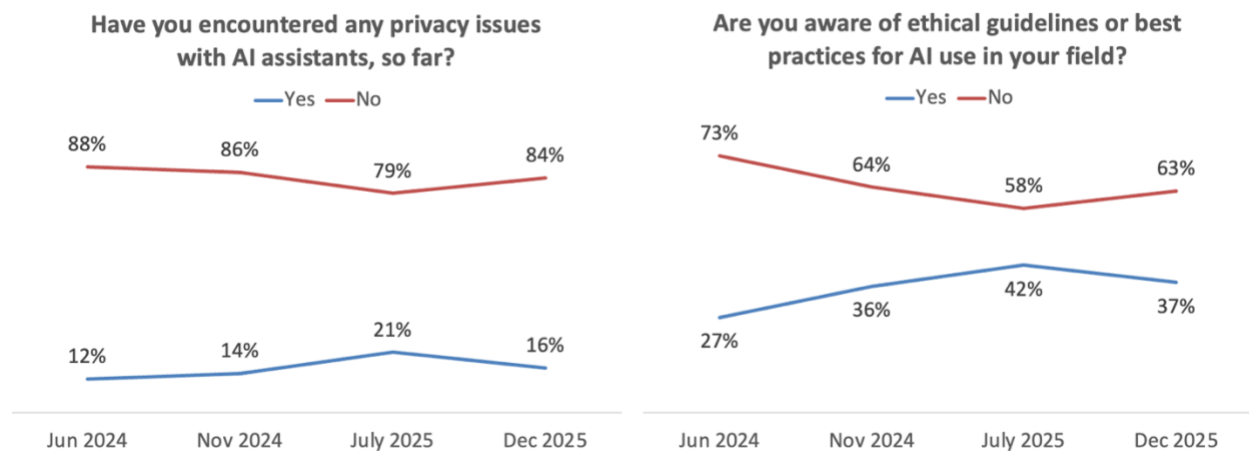

Figure 30. Timelines tracking the incidence of privacy issues alongside the evolution of professional awareness regarding ethical guidelines and best practices. Source: AI Public Opinion Tracker at USC, Waves 1-4

Together, these trends point to a governance gap: AI is widely used in communication and information contexts, but ethical norms and institutional guidance lag behind. The absence of friction should not be mistaken for the presence of safeguards.

Americans Split on AI Ethics

Public confidence in AI's ability to act according to ethical standards is **highly fragmented**, with no dominant consensus. Responses are spread across the full scale, but with noticeable clustering at the extremes. A sizable share of respondents express **very low confidence** (scores between 0 and 10), signaling deep ethical skepticism, while another meaningful group reports **very high confidence** (scores above 90). The relative weakness of mid-range scores suggests that ethical trust in AI is not gradually calibrated, but polarized - respondents tend to either trust AI strongly or doubt its ethical alignment altogether.

Respondents working in knowledge-based industries express higher expectations for AI to act ethically, while those employed in manual or service industries report lower expectations in this regard. Direct experience with AI may play a role in shaping these views, alongside the influence of public perceptions and narratives circulating in the public sphere about AI's positive or negative societal role.

This pattern reinforces earlier findings in the report, indicating that ethical concerns are not secondary or abstract, but central to how the public evaluates the legitimacy of AI systems.

Figure 31. Distribution of public belief scores regarding the likelihood of AI acting according to ethical standards and values (with 1 being lowest and 100 being highest)

Trust in AI & other institutions

Public trust in institutions is fragmented and generally low, creating a fragile backdrop for the expansion of AI-assisted communication. Traditional knowledge brokers, such as the press, news websites, and universities, retain moderate confidence. AI tools themselves are trusted at levels comparable to media institutions and businesses. Trust in AI is slightly above the sample average among respondents working in creative industries.

By contrast, those employed in human-centric and care sectors report above-average trust in universities and in business actors.

YouTube and universities lead in confidence, outpacing government and the press

Figure 32. Comparative levels of public confidence in various societal institutions and platforms, ranging from traditional media and government to digital platforms and AI tools.

As expected, political institutions, platforms and news influencers face high levels of distrust. This context matters: AI systems do not enter a neutral information environment, but one already marked by skepticism, polarization and declining institutional authority.

![Component Plot in Rotated Space showing a PCA scatter plot. Title above: "Confidence patterns reveal a sharp divide between traditional media and the tech-business sphere". A blue ellipse on the upper left groups Democratic_Party, Universities, TV_News, Press, News_websites. A red ellipse on the right groups News_influencers, Major_Corporations, Meta, Business, AI_tools, Government, YouTube, TikTok, X_Twitter, Republican_Party. X-axis: Component 1 (0.0 to 1.0). Y-axis: Component 2 (-0.1 to 0.9).]
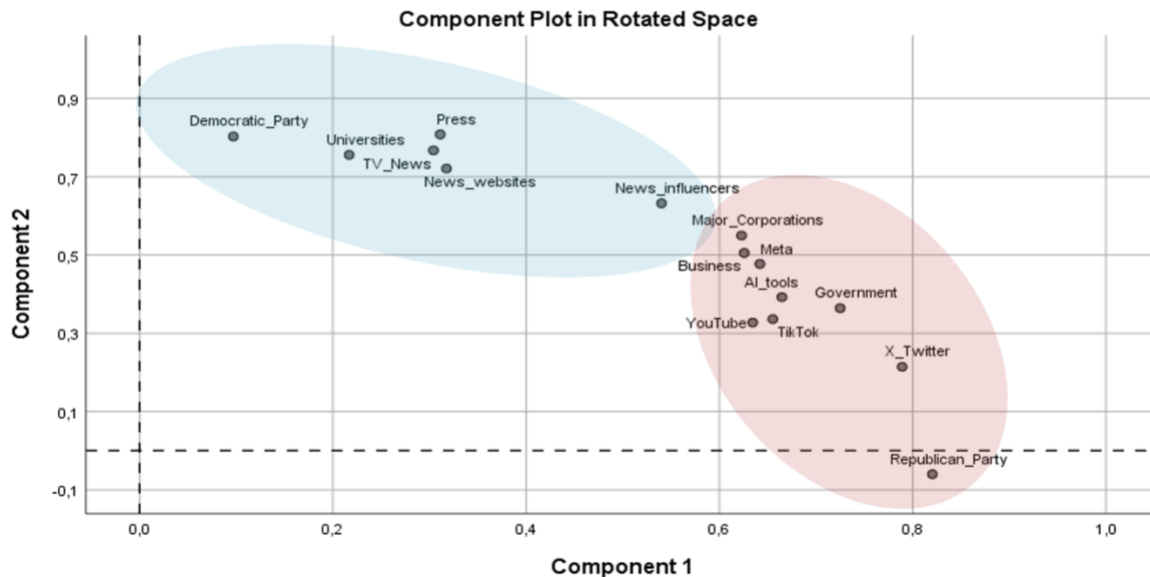
Figure 33. Principal component analysis (PCA) visualizing the grouping of societal institutions based on public confidence patterns

This rotated factor plot reveals a clear polarization of trust in U.S. institutions, based on survey data from the general population. The factorial analysis groups institutions that tend to be trusted or distrusted together, exposing two distinct audience segments.

- **On the left side of the chart, one cluster brings together universities, the press, TV news, news websites, and the Democratic Party**. This segment reflects a public that places relatively high trust in traditional media, academic institutions, and mainstream information gatekeepers. Trust here appears institutionally anchored and aligned with conventional sources of authority and expertise.

- **On the right side, a second, clearly separated cluster includes major corporations, business, government, AI tools, and digital platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and X (Twitter), alongside the Republican Party**. This grouping suggests a different trust profile, oriented toward corporate, governmental, and platform-based actors rather than legacy media or academia.

The distance between the two clusters indicates limited overlap: respondents who trust one group of institutions are likely to distrust the other. Overall, the graphic confirms a structural split in public confidence, reflecting broader political and informational divides in U.S. society, where trust is no longer evenly distributed but organized along coherent, competing worldviews.

A notable and consequential finding is the clear positioning of AI tools and social media platforms within a single trust cluster. Confidence in AI and platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and X is not diffuse or neutral; it is distinctly associated with one specific audience segment, which suggests that emerging technologies are already being interpreted through an ideological and cultural lens, rather than as broadly shared public utilities.

The implications are significant. **As AI systems and social platforms increasingly mediate access to information, their uneven distribution of trust risks reinforcing parallel informational ecosystems.** Rather than acting as bridges across social divides, these technologies may deepen existing polarization by amplifying narratives that resonate with already-aligned audiences. In the long term, this segmentation could affect how different groups consume news and respond to public policy or institutional authority. The data points to a future in which technological trust itself becomes politicized, shaping not only media consumption, but also democratic deliberation and social cohesion.

Democracy & elections

When asked about AI's impact on democracy, public opinion remains divided and uncertain. A plurality believes AI may help democratic processes, but nearly as many express concern that it could cause more harm than good. The largest group, however, remains unsure—underscoring the absence of a settled public judgment.

Uncertainty is the prevailing view on AI's impact on democracy

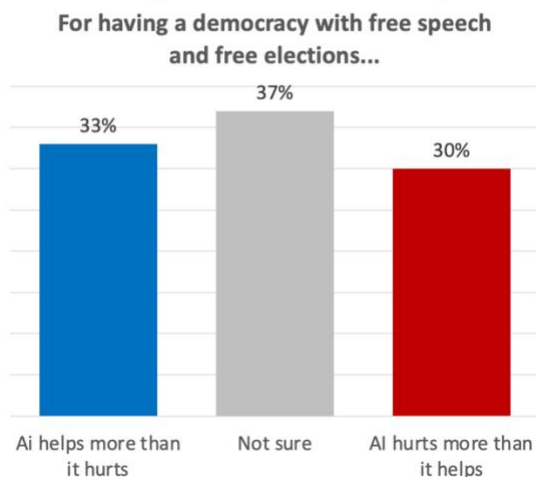For having a democracy with free speech and free elections...

Figure 34. Distribution of public opinion on whether AI helps or hurts the maintenance of democracy, free speech, and free elections.

This uncertainty reflects both limited experience and high stakes. Unlike productivity or journalism quality, democracy represents a collective outcome whose consequences are harder to observe directly. The data suggest not indifference, but caution: Americans recognize that AI has democratic implications, even if they are still forming opinions about what those implications will be.

AI, trust, and democracy: a system under strain

The findings in this chapter point to a common underlying dynamic: artificial intelligence is entering public communication in a context already marked by low trust, weak institutional authority, plus a limited ethical consensus. As AI assistants are increasingly used to create, search and interpret information, the social frameworks needed to govern this shift remain underdeveloped.

Most users report few direct privacy problems and show limited awareness of existing ethical guidelines, suggesting that AI adoption is proceeding with relatively little friction. At the same time, trust in institutions - including media organizations, technology platforms, and AI tools themselves - is fragmented and fragile. The factor analysis reinforces this pattern, showing that confidence in AI and social media is not broadly shared but distinctly associated with a specific segment of the public, while other groups cluster around traditional institutions such as legacy media and universities. No single actor commands broad public confidence, and AI systems are being layered onto an information environment already characterized by skepticism and polarization.

Against this backdrop, public opinion on AI's democratic impact remains unresolved. **Americans recognize that AI can shape free speech and public debate, but many remain uncertain about whether its influence will ultimately help or harm democracy**. This uncertainty reflects cautious awareness rather than disengagement: AI's consequences are widely perceived as significant, even if they are not yet fully visible.

In a low-trust environment with weak institutional authority and limited ethical guidance, even efficiency-enhancing tools can amplify confusion and democratic vulnerability. The challenge, therefore, is not simply to improve AI systems, but to strengthen the social, institutional, and ethical frameworks that shape how they are used and understood in an increasingly polarized public sphere.

The media ecosystem shaping AI's impact

Social media is used primarily for connection and opinion-sharing, not information dissemination.
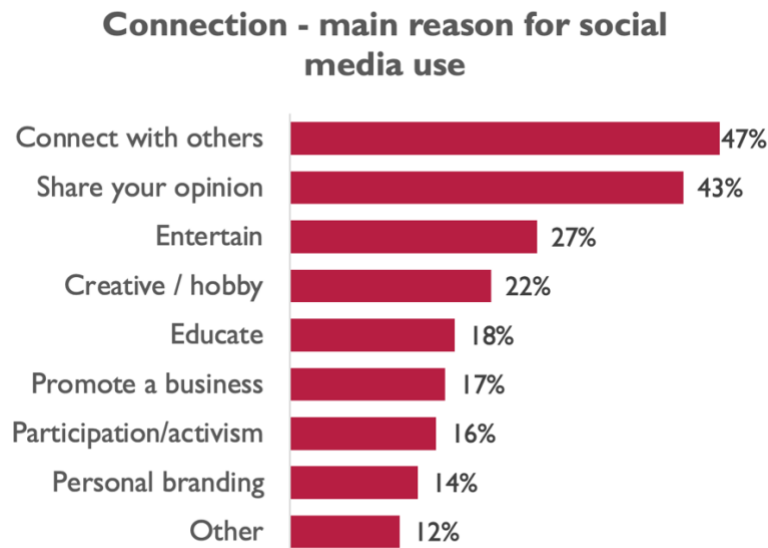
Connection - main reason for social media use

Figure 35. Breakdown of the primary self-reported reasons for posting content on social media or websites.

This expressive and relational use of platforms helps explain why AI-generated content can quickly become intertwined with personal views, activism and identity, amplifying both reach and emotional resonance.

Which of the following digital media platforms did you use to access news in the last week? (Select all that apply)
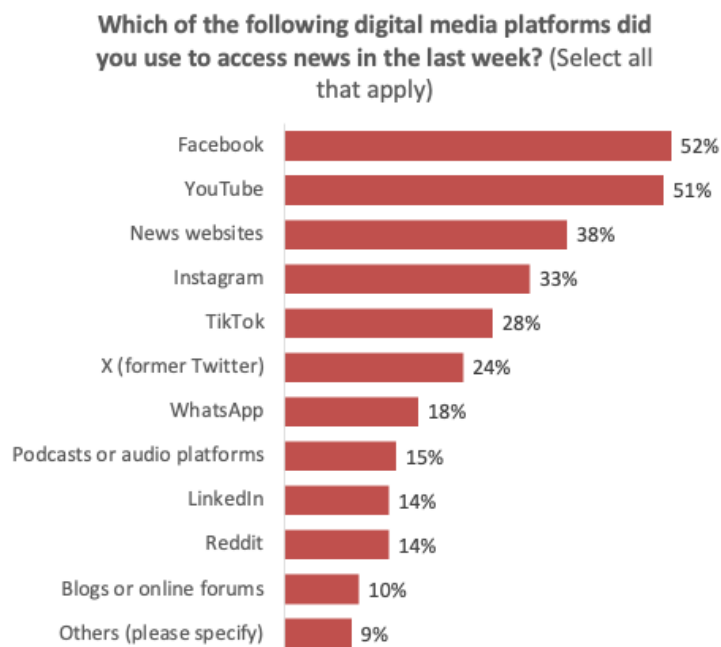

Figure 36. Ranking of digital media platforms utilized for news consumption

News consumption is dominated by social and video platforms, with Facebook and YouTube surpassing news websites. This platform-first pattern places algorithms—and increasingly AI systems—between audiences and original sources.

WhatsApp and Instagram lead the surge in digital usage in the last 2 years
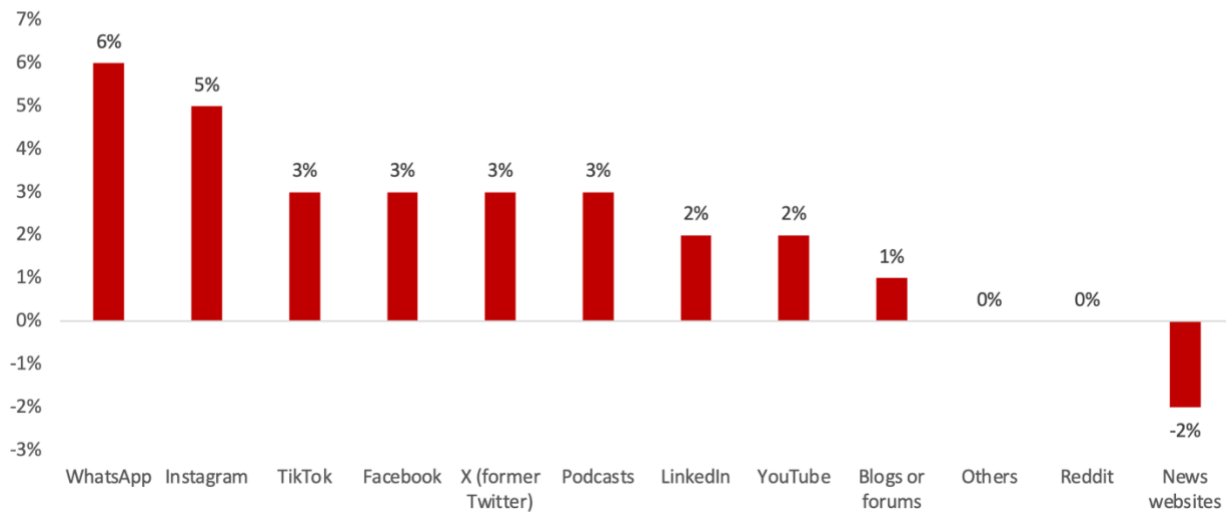
Figure 37. Comparative growth rates of digital platform usage over the past 24 months, highlighting the shift toward messaging apps

Social media use continues to grow across most platforms, particularly messaging and visual-first services, while traditional news websites show slight decline. This shift reinforces the central role of platforms, rather than publishers, in shaping how information circulates.

Digital news is a daily habit for 42%, while nearly 90% check in weekly

Figure 38. Patterns of news consumption on digital platforms. Survey question: How often in the last week did you read news on digital platforms (websites, social media etc)?

Most respondents consume news frequently, with a large share accessing digital news daily or multiple times per day. High exposure increases both the influence of AI-assisted information and the potential impact of errors or bias. Posting and sharing content are increasing faster than news reading. This imbalance indicates a communication environment where circulation outpaces verification, an important condition for AI-driven amplification.

Digital media use patterns in the U.S.

Figure 39. Comparative frequency of reading, posting, and sharing digital content among U.S. adults

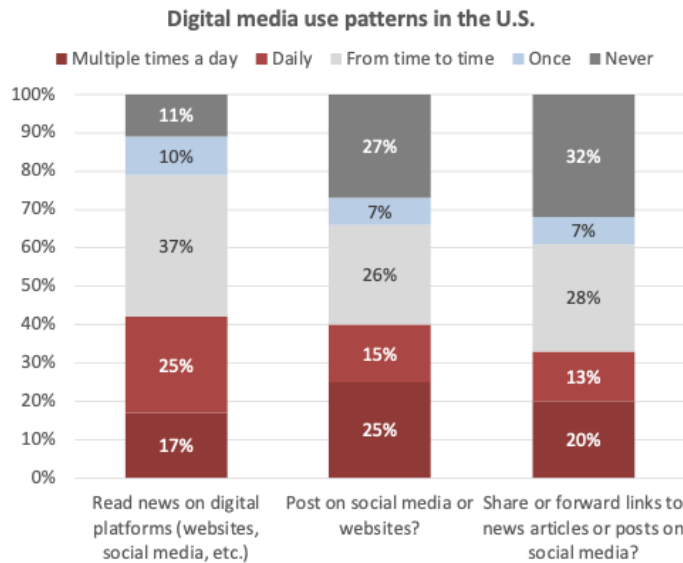Reading, posting, and sharing follow distinct patterns, with sharing being less frequent but still significant. AI tools that lower the cost of producing or forwarding content may further accelerate these dynamics. Posting and sharing content are increasing faster than news reading, in the last year. This imbalance suggests a communication environment where circulation outpaces verification, an important condition for AI-driven amplification.

Which do you prefer for getting news, in general?

Figure 40. Breakdown of primary preferences for accessing news, comparing traditional broadcast media against digital and social alternatives.

Television remains the leading source of news, but social media now rivals it closely. Search engines and print play a marginal role, underscoring the decline of intentional, source-driven news discovery.

Media use and the expanding role of AI

These patterns of media use help clarify why AI assistants are becoming central actors in the information ecosystem. **AI tools are already used for news and information at levels that exceed many traditional pathways, and public confidence in AI rivals, or in some cases surpasses, that placed in established news sources**. At the same time, the

boundaries between content creation, news production, and information discovery are becoming increasingly blurred.

As AI-generated summaries, answers and narratives circulate alongside traditional journalism, many users no longer clearly distinguish between sources and formats, or modes of production. This convergence creates both opportunity and risk: AI can lower barriers to access and understanding, but it can also dilute accountability and obscure provenance.

In this context, AI's role is no longer limited to supporting communication. It is actively reshaping how information is produced, encountered, trusted, and shared, making its influence consequential across journalism, public discourse, as well as democratic life in general.

SYNTHESIS AND IMPLICATIONS

PART V. SYNTHESIS AND IMPLICATIONS

What this Means for Communication Education and Practice

Beyond support and fear. Interpreting the divide in public attitudes toward AI

Across this report, Americans emerge as neither uniformly enthusiastic nor uniformly fearful about artificial intelligence. The data show widespread awareness, growing use, and a mix of optimism and concern about AI's impact on journalism, democracy, as well as work. The corroborated findings point to a deeper and more consequential divide - one that cannot be reduced to being "pro" or "anti" AI. This divide is best understood as a difference in how Americans **normalize AI, trust its outputs, while assessing its risks**.

To capture this underlying structure, we developed an **AI Exposure Index**, which serves as a unifying interpretive lens for the results presented throughout this report.

The AI Exposure axis: a summary interpretation

The index integrates multiple dimensions explored in earlier sections: acceptance of AI use in professional contexts, perceived societal and journalistic benefits, confidence in dealing with AI-generated content, and concern about risks such as misinformation, polarization, and job displacement. Rather than treating these attitudes in isolation, the index shows that they tend to cluster into a coherent orientation. Higher exposure scores reflect a pattern of **normalization and confidence**, coupled with a reduced perception of risk. Lower scores reflect **caution, skepticism, and greater sensitivity to potential harms**.
This axis helps explain why seemingly contradictory attitudes - such as high AI use alongside low concern about misinformation - often coexist.

When viewed through this lens, the U.S. public can be broadly described as comprising two overlapping but distinct orientations. In the present sample, approximately 44.9% of respondents fall into the AI-exposed category, while 46.9% are classified as AI-sceptic.

- On one side are **AI-exposed or techno-optimistic Americans**. This group is more likely to be younger, highly educated, and actively engaged with AI tools in daily life. They tend to see AI as a legitimate and useful instrument - one that improves productivity and integrates seamlessly into work and learning. Their relationship with AI is characterized by confidence. They are more inclined to trust AI-generated content and to believe they can reliably distinguish between human- and machine-produced information. At the same time, they are less likely to perceive AI as a major threat to journalism, democratic debate, or their own employment prospects.

- On the other side are **AI-skeptical Americans**, who approach AI with greater distance and restraint. This group skews older and reports lower levels of AI use. Their skepticism is not driven by hostility toward technology, but by heightened concern about its social and democratic implications. AI-skeptical respondents are more

attentive to risks such as misinformation, automation in journalism, and the erosion of accountability. They are more likely to question whether efficiency gains justify potential losses in quality and transparency.

Importantly, neither orientation dominates the public sphere. Most Americans fall between these poles, reflecting ambivalence and ongoing negotiation rather than fixed positions.

What explains variation along the exposure axis
One of the most consistent findings across analyses is that **experience with AI matters more than social position**.
- Frequent use of AI tools is among the strongest predictors of higher exposure. So are positive assessments of AI's impact on productivity and high satisfaction with AI use.
- In other words, familiarity tends to reduce critical distance. When AI works well in everyday tasks, confidence in its broader role increases - often extending beyond the specific contexts in which that experience was gained.

Broader worldviews also shape AI exposure.
- Americans who express confidence in science and trust in government are more likely to fall on the techno-optimistic side of the axis. This suggests that AI exposure is embedded in a wider orientation toward institutional capacity and technological progress.

Digital news exposure matters.
- Higher overall engagement with digital news is associated with **lower** AI exposure. Americans who follow digital news more closely tend to be more skeptical, possibly because greater exposure to online information ecosystems increases awareness of misinformation, content automation and manipulation.

Equally revealing is what does *not* explain variation.
- Occupational category does not meaningfully differentiate AI-exposed and AI-skeptical respondents, challenging the idea that attitudes toward AI are primarily driven by exposure to labor market risk. Nor do specific media channels play a decisive role.

Why this divide matters
The AI exposure divide helps make sense of several tensions observed throughout this report. It explains why high levels of AI use coexist with persistent concern about misinformation, and why confidence in personal skill does not necessarily align with caution about systemic risks. It also highlights a central paradox of AI adoption. **Those who are most comfortable using AI - and who benefit most from its efficiencies - may also be the most likely to underestimate its limitations.** In AI-mediated information environments, confidence can become a source of vulnerability.

These findings have direct implications for education, professional practice, and public communication. Efforts to strengthen AI literacy should not focus only on skeptics or less digitally engaged groups. Highly educated and frequent AI users, often the most confident, also

require support in recognizing the structural risks of automation, overreliance, and opaque decision-making systems.

As AI becomes embedded in everyday communication, maintaining space for critical debate is essential. A resilient democratic response to AI depends not on choosing between innovation and caution, but on sustaining both adoption and oversight. The future of AI in the United States will be shaped less by technical capability alone than by how effectively confidence is balanced with critical judgment. The AI Exposure Index offers a tool for tracking that balance and identifying where confidence may quietly turn into risk.

The results point to a structural transformation of the communication field rather than a temporary technological disruption. This shift calls for a recalibration of communication education, one that moves beyond simple narratives of optimism or alarm.

Key signals from the data

- AI is widely used for communication tasks, including content creation, summarization, and news discovery.
- Public trust in AI tools rivals or exceeds trust in several traditional media and institutional sources.
- For many users, the boundary between AI-generated content and journalism is increasingly blurred.
- Productivity gains are widely acknowledged, while concerns focus more on transformation than outright job loss.
- Ethical awareness and governance frameworks lag behind the pace of AI adoption.

Implications for communication education and practice

Training future communication professionals now requires preparing them to operate in AI-assisted environments with discernment and responsibility. Core priorities include:

- **AI literacy as a foundational competence.** Students must understand not only how to use AI tools, but how they shape visibility and meaning.
- **Source verification.** As AI becomes a gateway to news and knowledge, tracing sources, assessing credibility, and recognizing AI-generated content are critical skills.
- **Human judgment and editorial responsibility.** AI can accelerate workflows, but it cannot replace ethical reasoning, contextual understanding, or accountability.
- **Strategic use over dependence.** Professionals must learn when AI adds value and when it introduces bias, distortion, or oversimplification.
- **Ethics and transparency by design.** Norms of disclosure, attribution, and responsible use should be embedded in everyday practice.

In short, the challenge ahead is not whether AI will be used in communication, but how well future professionals are equipped to use it critically, strategically and responsibly.

Education has a decisive role in shaping AI integration into professional cultures - by producing graduates who are proficient users of AI tools, but also critical interpreters of their influence on public discourse, journalism and democratic life.

Methodology and Project Background

Methodology and Project Background

This report presents findings from **Wave 4 of the AI Public Opinion Tracker**, a longitudinal research initiative developed and coordinated by the **College of Information and Communications**. Launched in 2024, the project was designed to systematically monitor how artificial intelligence is understood, used, and evaluated by the U.S. adult public, with a particular focus on communication practices, media systems, journalism, work, education, and democratic life.

Data collection and sample

Wave 4 data were collected between **December 2 and December 22, 2025**, through an online survey administered to a **nationally representative sample of adults in the United States**. The final dataset includes **1,051 completed responses**. Respondents were recruited using established online sampling procedures to ensure broad demographic coverage.

To enhance representativeness and comparability across waves, survey responses were **post-stratification weighted** using the same procedures applied in Wave 3.

Weighting variables included standard demographic indicators - such as age, gender, education level, race and ethnicity, and geographic region - aligned with U.S. Census benchmarks. This approach ensures that the results accurately reflect the U.S. adult population and supports valid longitudinal analysis.

Measurement and comparability

The Wave 4 questionnaire closely followed the **conceptual structure, wording, and measurement scales** used in previous waves of the project. Core indicators - covering awareness of AI, patterns of use, trust, perceived benefits and risks, impacts on communication work, journalism, misinformation, and democracy - were retained to allow direct comparisons over time.

New items were introduced selectively in Wave 4 to capture **emerging developments**, including the growing use of AI assistants for news discovery, information search, and content creation in communication-intensive contexts. These additions were designed to complement, rather than disrupt, the existing measurement framework.

As with all survey research, findings reflect **self-reported perceptions and behaviors** at the time of data collection. The study does not seek to measure technical performance of AI systems, but rather public understanding, experience, and evaluation of their social and communicative impact.

Methodological Appendix. Construction of the AI Exposure Index

The AI Exposure Index was developed to capture a multidimensional orientation toward artificial intelligence that goes beyond isolated attitudes such as trust, fear, or perceived usefulness. Rather than treating public opinion on AI as a binary or unidimensional construct, the index conceptualizes exposure as a **cognitive-informational profile** shaped by normalization, confidence, and risk perception.

In this framework, exposure does not imply lack of knowledge, education, or digital access. Instead, it refers to a configuration in which strong acceptance of AI, high confidence in one's evaluative abilities, and optimism about AI's societal role coexist with a reduced sensitivity to potential risks. This approach is informed by research on technological normalization, overconfidence, and risk underestimation in complex information environments.

Item selection and dimensional structure

The index integrates survey items grouped into four theoretically grounded dimensions:

1. **Normative acceptance of AI use**
   This dimension captures whether respondents consider the professional use of AI tools acceptable across common communicative tasks, such as generating ideas, translating or summarizing content, and producing communication materials. These items reflect the degree to which AI use is socially and professionally normalized.

2. **Perceived societal and journalistic benefits**
   Items in this dimension measure respondents' evaluations of AI's impact on society, democracy, journalism, and productivity. They assess whether AI is seen as improving efficiency, quality, or democratic functioning, rather than harming these domains.

3. **Trust and self-assessed confidence in AI-generated content**
   This dimension combines trust in AI-produced journalistic content with respondents' confidence in their own ability to distinguish between human- and AI-generated information. The latter is included as an indicator of perceived competence, which is conceptually linked to overconfidence rather than objective detection ability.

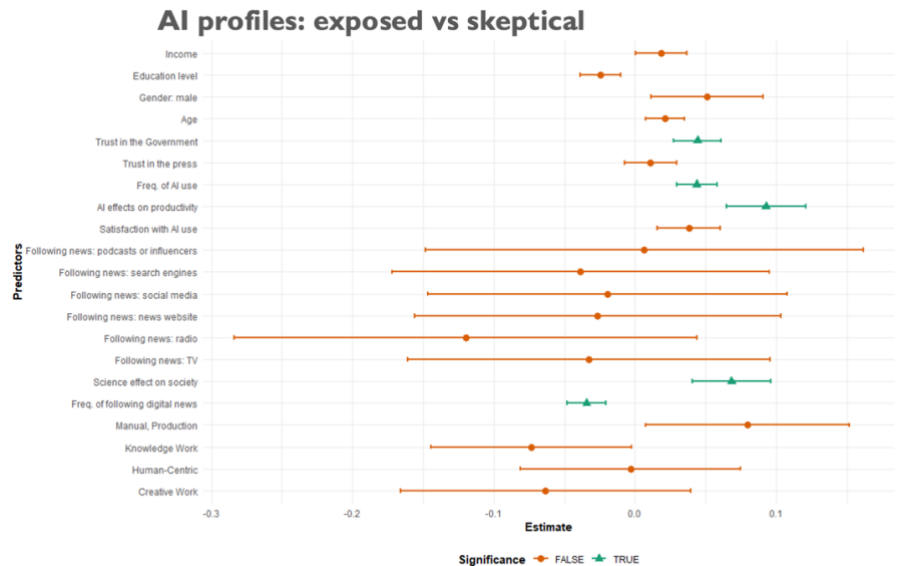4. **Minimization of perceived risks associated with AI**
   This dimension captures attitudes toward commonly discussed risks, including misinformation and disinformation, polarization of public debate, declines in journalistic quality, and labor market disruption. These items assess the extent to which respondents downplay or reject such risks.

Together, these dimensions reflect a coherent orientation toward AI that combines normative judgments, evaluative beliefs, confidence assessments, and risk perceptions.

Scale harmonization and coding procedures

All items included in the index were measured using ordinal Likert-type scales or binary acceptability indicators. To ensure interpretive consistency, items were harmonized so that **higher values uniformly indicate greater AI exposure or techno-optimism**.

Items expressing positive evaluations or acceptance of AI were coded in their original direction. Items expressing concern or negative consequences were **reverse-coded**, such that higher

values reflect lower perceived risk. Standard reverse-coding procedures were applied based on the original scale range (e.g., for five-point scales, new value = 6 − original value). Binary items measuring acceptability were coded to align with the same directional logic. This harmonization ensures that all components contribute to the index in a conceptually consistent manner.

Figure 41. Regression model identifying the demographic, professional, and attitudinal factors that significantly predict "exposed" versus "skeptical" AI user profiles.

Index aggregation and distribution

The AI Exposure Index was computed as the **mean score across all included items**. A mean-based aggregation was chosen to avoid overweighting any single dimension and to preserve the multidimensional character of the construct.

The resulting index is a continuous measure reflecting respondents' overall position on the exposure–skepticism spectrum. In the observed data, the index exhibits substantial variation, with scores spanning a wide range and clustering around moderate values. This distribution indicates that public attitudes toward AI are not polarized into extremes, but instead form a broad continuum of orientations.

Internal checks confirmed that no single dimension dominated the index and that all components contributed meaningfully to overall variation.

Typology construction

For descriptive and comparative purposes, the continuous index was translated into categorical typologies using two complementary strategies.

First, a **conceptual three-category typology** was defined to distinguish between AI-skeptical, ambivalent, and AI-exposed or techno-optimistic respondents. This approach preserves an intermediate category for mixed or uncertain orientations.

Second, for analyses requiring exhaustive classification, a **binary typology** was constructed using a median-based cut-off on the index. Respondents with scores at or below the median were classified as AI-skeptical, while those above the median were classified as AI-exposed or techno-optimistic.

Importantly, while these typologies facilitate interpretation and profiling, **inferential analyses rely on the continuous index** to retain informational precision and statistical power.

Analytical strategy

To examine factors associated with variation along the AI exposure axis, regression analyses were conducted using the continuous index or its binary derivative as dependent variables, depending on analytical purpose.

Sociological interpretation and limitations

The AI Exposure Index should be interpreted as a **relational and contextual measure**, not as an objective assessment of individuals' actual ability to detect AI-generated content or manage AI-related risks. Confidence and self-assessed competence may diverge from real-world performance.

The cross-sectional nature of the survey limits causal inference. While associations between AI use, perceived utility, and exposure are robust, the directionality of these relationships cannot be definitively established.

Additionally, all measures rely on self-reported attitudes and behaviors, which may be subject to social desirability bias or overestimation of competence.

Replicability and comparative use

The index was designed to be transparent and replicable across national contexts. Item selection, coding logic, and aggregation procedures are explicitly documented to allow reuse and adaptation in future surveys.

Because the index captures a general orientation toward AI rather than context-specific attitudes, it is particularly well suited for comparative research examining how different societies negotiate the normalization and risks of artificial intelligence.

Research team and governance

This research project was coordinated by **Assoc. Prof. Dr. Dan Sultanescu**, together with the same core research team responsible for the design and implementation of Wave 3. The research team includes an **international group of scholars and experts**, reflecting the project's interdisciplinary and cross-national orientation.

The team includes contributors from **Romania** (Dr. Andreea Stancea, Dr. Dana Sultanescu, Emil Pislaru, and Leo Sultanescu) and from the **United States** (Linwan Wu and Randy Covington). The team collectively oversaw questionnaire development, data collection, weighting, analysis, and interpretation, ensuring methodological continuity and analytical rigor across waves.

The project has benefited from the sustained institutional support of **Dean Tom Reichert**, whose leadership and commitment have played a critical role in enabling the continuity, visibility, and academic independence of the research initiative.

International dimension and collaboration. Future directions

While the AI Public Opinion Tracker focuses primarily on the U.S. adult population, the project has developed a strong international component. In 2025, selected findings were integrated into a **global report coordinated by UNESCO**, titled *World Trends Report*, contributing U.S. data and analytical insights to a broader international discussion on AI, communication, and society.

The project is part of an ongoing collaboration among multiple **UNESCO Chairs and academic institutions** in the United States and Romania, reinforcing its role as a bridge between national data collection and global policy-relevant research.

The research team intends to **continue and expand** the AI Public Opinion Tracker in future waves. Planned developments include the expansion of the empirical base through the integration of international datasets, the refinement of longitudinal indicators, and the public release of selected datasets for use by researchers, think tanks, and policy institutions.

By making data available for secondary analysis, the project aims to support comparative research and evidence-based debate on the social, cultural, and democratic implications of artificial intelligence. The long-term objective is to establish the tracker as a durable research infrastructure for understanding how AI reshapes communication practices and public life over time.

Photography Credits

COVER: Freepik
P.13 (AI USED FOR WORK OR STUDY): Freepik
P.22 (COMUNICATION LABOR UNDER AI PRESSURE): AI Image Generator/Freepik
P.29 (INFORMATION, AND CREDIBILITY): generated with Bing Images
P.36 COMMUNICATION, DISINFO, DEMOCRACY & ETHICS): generated with Bing Images
P.49 (SYNTHESIS AND IMPLICATIONS): generated with Bing Images
P.53 (METHODOLOGY): foto - https://sc.edu/uofsc/posts/2025/03/usc-sets-new-application-record.php