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How Do We Handle Imaginaries?

**Understanding Audiences Engagement With
Perceived Social Impacts Of AI Technologies On Job Displacement**

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Abstract

In the 21st century, technological advancements have profoundly influenced various aspects of human life, enhancing both quality and efficiency. The emergence of Facebook in 2004 marked the dawn of the social media era, while the launch of Apple's iPhone in 2007 revolutionised the mobile phone industry. Entering the 2020s, the spotlight has shifted towards Virtual Reality and Artificial Intelligence (AI), with the introduction of the Metaverse positioning itself as the future of the Internet. Furthermore, the debut of ChatGPT in November 2022 has catalysed a paradigm shift in the technology sector by enabling sophisticated conversations between humans and AI, underscoring the era's rapid technological evolution.

This thesis explores the influence of social and media imaginaries on how professionals in the technology and creative industries engage with artificial intelligence (AI) narratives regarding job displacement. Focusing on a digital platform, Reddit, particularly the subreddit r/futurology, this research integrates semi-structured interviews with industry professionals and thematic analysis of online discussions. It unveils the nuanced interplay of emotions and perspectives that shape professional engagement with AI narratives. The study particularly highlights the role of techfluencers as one of the factors moulding professionals' understanding and engagement, influencing their perceptions of AI's impact on employment. The findings reveal that while techfluencers contribute to shaping the imaginaries, the actual engagement with AI narratives varies significantly, reflecting a broader range of individual concerns and industry-specific considerations. By analysing these dynamics, the thesis offers deeper insights into how media narratives and influencer communications guide industry-specific perceptions of AI, advocating for a more nuanced discussion that reflects the complex implications of AI across different sectors. The research contributes to media and communication studies by demonstrating the critical role of digital platforms in shaping professional conversations about technological impacts suggesting pathways for more informed and balanced public dialogues about AI's future role in the future of work.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, job displacement, media narratives, media imaginaries, tech-savvy, audience engagement, social imaginaries, techfluencers, media producer.

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Table of Content

1. Introduction	
1.1. Aims and research questions	7-11
2. Literature Review: Existing Research and Theoretical Frameworks	
2.1. AI developments and the perceived societal impacts	12-14
2.2. AI's implications on job displacement	14-18
2.3. Imaginaries: Social and Media	18-21
2.4. Audience Engagement	
2.4.1. Feelings and emotional engagement	21-24
2.4.2. Engagement in media studies	25-27
2.5. Platforms and facilitators	
2.5.1. The role of media platforms in disseminating AI narratives	27-30
2.5.2. Opinion leaders in tech industry	30-31
2.6. Summary	31-32
3. Research Methods	
3.1. Recruitment process	32-33
3.2. Conducting the interviews	33-34
3.3. Data collection for a second method	34-36
3.4. Transcribing, organising data and coding process	36-38
4. Analysis: The Imaginaries Constructed Around AI Narratives	
4.1. AI narratives: the distribution and engagement	
4.1.1. The diffusion of AI narratives	39-42
4.1.2. AI narratives in the overloaded information landscape	42-44
4.2. Understanding AI narratives	
4.2.1. A journey back in history	44-47
4.2.2. Beyond reception: an active engagement	47-50
4.3. The AI experts	
4.3.1. Techfluencers: a media source of AI narratives	50-55
4.3.2. We will have AI experts, but we are no expert yet	55-57
4.4. Understanding AI narratives: an interplay of social imaginaries and emotional responses	57-63
4.5. Responses to an imagined future of work with AI: to what extent do we want to prepare for it?	63-67
5. Conclusion	

5.1.	Answering the research questions	68-73
5.2.	Future research directions and recommendations	73-74
5.3.	Final thoughts	75
6.	References	75-83
7.	Appendices	84-93

Chapter 1: Introduction

I attended TEDxKI 2024 in March, which was themed *Lights Out—What Happens Now?*¹ During the event, one of the speakers, sleep expert Li Åslund, who holds a PhD in psychology, shared an intriguing reference to the dawn of automobile innovation. Åslund described how the earliest cars in the 1880s, the horseless carriages, were introduced without any safety warnings for pedestrians. Initially, a person was tasked with carrying a red flag, signalling the approach of these vehicles to ensure public safety. However, as automotive technology progressed, introducing features like horns and headlights, the necessity for the flag bearer diminished, eventually making the position redundant. This anecdote vividly illustrates how technological advancements can significantly alter human roles and societal norms.

The early 21st century has been marked by transformative technological advancements that have reshaped almost every aspect of human life. Facebook's launch in 2004 catalysing the social media revolution to the introduction of the iPhone in 2007 disrupting mobile communications, and Uber in 2009 creating a new paradigm in mobility services. Now, as we move deeper into the 2020s, AI technologies are at the forefront, heralded by many as the next major shift in innovation. Recent years have seen significant workforce changes due to AI-driven disruptions, with major tech companies and industries experiencing shifts in job structures and skill demands, resulting in substantial layoffs² and provoking intense debates on AI's potential to displace human jobs, diminishing labour demand and wages (Acemoglu and Restrepo, 2018). Scholars have highlighted how digital technologies, such as social networks, enable the environment to challenge normative societal views while simultaneously contributing to maintaining the status quo (Carstensen, 2009; Harp and Tremayne, 2006).

This backdrop sets the stage for examining how social and media imaginaries—conceptualised by Taylor (2003) and Chambers (2016)—influence public perceptions of AI. These imaginaries play a critical role in how technology is integrated into societal frameworks, influencing perceptions of AI's impact on employment and the broader socio-economic landscape.

¹ TEDxKI 2024: Lights Out — What Happens Now? Website <https://www.tedxki.com/events/>

² CNN (2023) 2023 layoff tracker: The latest on which companies have announced job cuts. Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/04/25/business/layoffs-2023/index.html> (Accessed: 03 May 2024).

This thesis explores the nuanced interplay between AI narratives and public perception, focusing particularly on the media's role in shaping societal responses to AI's impact on employment. While current research predominantly addresses the risks and disruptions associated with AI, there is a notable gap in understanding the opportunities it presents, such as enhancing specific job skills through labour complementarity. This study aims to fill the void in qualitative research by examining the emotional and psychological effects of AI on workers, such as anxiety, fear of job loss, and changes in identity.

Furthermore, existing research predominantly focuses on the risks and disruptions posed by AI, with a lack of attention to the opportunities it can create, such as labour complementarity that enhances demand for certain skills. By delving into how tech-savvy audiences interact with and engage with AI-driven media narratives about job displacement, this research seeks to expand our understanding of AI's multifaceted societal impacts. It integrates insights from media studies, psychology, and sociology to provide a comprehensive analysis of audience engagement and the dynamic relationship between media narratives and societal reactions. This approach broadens academic discussions in media and communication studies and deepens the comprehension of AI's subtle effects on public sentiment and behaviour.

Central to this study is an investigation into the construction, distribution, and understanding of AI narratives across different media platforms, examining the influence of tech influencers and the role of a digital platform in shaping public attitudes toward AI and its implications for employment. This exploration is crucial for developing informed policy and decision-making that align with societal values and needs, aiming to bridge the gap between technological advances and public understanding. By elucidating the complex dynamics of media influence, this research sets the stage to answer questions about narrative impact and the consequential actions audiences take in response to AI's perceived effects on the job market.

1.1. Aims and research questions

This research employs a phronetic approach to research, which Flyvbjerg (2001) suggests is essential for understanding 'the problems, risks, and possibilities we face as individuals and societies and contributing to social and political praxis' (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 4). Current discussions about AI's perceived impacts showcase a spectrum of viewpoints, from optimism

to scepticism (Velarda, 2019). Couldry and Hepp (2016) emphasise that ‘the social world is not just mediated but mediatised’ (2016, p. 15), reflecting the transformative influence of media on societal dynamics and structures.

The study is driven by three objectives: Firstly, to identify and analyse the primary media channels through which AI narratives are disseminated to tech-savvy audiences, enhancing our understanding of how these narratives circulate and influence public perception. Secondly, to explore how these audiences engage with AI narratives, assessing how media imaginaries and emotional responses shape their perceptions of AI’s impact on society and employment. Thirdly, to investigate the actions taken by these audiences in response to their perceptions of AI and job displacement, exploring the motivations behind these actions, influenced by factors such as media literacy, trust in media, and the credibility of the narrative sources.

By meeting these objectives, the research will provide a detailed exploration of the interplay between technology narratives and societal responses, with a particular focus on the emotional and psychological dimensions of engagement with AI narratives regarding employment. This study aims to fill the gap in audience research within the context of AI, a field often overshadowed by broader technological or economic analyses but crucial for understanding how individuals interact with and interpret emerging technologies.

Furthermore, this thesis recognises a considerable gap in the comprehensive understanding of AI despite extensive discussions. Much of the AI imaginaries remains speculative, leaving individuals to navigate and contemplate their futures with AI based on limited information. While AI frequently features as a topic of interest across academic and professional fields, its profound and varied implications continue to shape complex societal and individual perspectives.

The originality of this research lies in its integration of social sciences perspectives with media audience studies, offering new insights into how AI narratives influence public opinion and individual consciousness. By focusing on how individuals relate to AI narratives through media, this thesis contributes significantly to discussions on media influence, public perception, and the sociocultural dynamics of technological advancements. In conclusion, this thesis contributes to the academic discussions on AI and positions itself at the forefront

of emerging research trends. It aims to provide a comprehensive analysis that will serve as a valuable reference for future studies, helping to shape the trajectory of social science research in the context of fast-paced technological development.

In the context of this thesis, the following questions should be answered:

1. How are AI narratives distributed among tech-savvy audiences and users, and what does their engagement with these narratives indicate about their understanding of AI's societal impacts, particularly on job displacement?
2. In what ways do tech-savvy audiences and users interpret and respond to AI narratives, and how do these interpretations influence their actions concerning perceived job displacement?
3. How do media imaginaries contribute to shaping the engagement of tech-savvy audiences and users with AI narratives?
4. What do the actions of tech-savvy audiences and users in response to AI narratives reveal about their relationship with media imaginaries and their overall understanding of these narratives?

To adequately address the research questions outlined in this study, a qualitative research mixed-method was chosen for its strength in exploring the nuanced perceptions and complex interactions of individuals with AI narratives. Qualitative methods allow for deep exploration of the subjective experiences, emotions, and contexts that quantitative methods might overlook. This approach is particularly fitting for examining how tech-savvy audiences and users engage with and react to AI narratives, as it enables a detailed analysis of their interpretations and responses.

Reddit serves as a primary source for this research due to its distinct structure and the diverse, community-driven content it hosts. Structurally, Reddit is a network of communities called subreddits, each dedicated to a specific topic or interest. Users within these subreddits post content, comment, and engage in discussions, creating a dynamic and interactive environment. Unlike traditional social media platforms that primarily focus on personal updates and direct interactions, Reddit emphasises content sharing and open discussions, making it an ideal place for gauging public opinion and gathering diverse perspectives.

Each subreddit operates under a set of rules defined by its moderators and is designed to foster in-depth discussions among its members, who can upvote or downvote content, thus influencing what becomes more visible to the community. This voting system allows the most valued discussions to surface to the top, ensuring that quality content receives more attention. The subreddit *r/futurology*³, specifically chosen for this study, is a hub for tech enthusiasts and professionals to discuss future technological developments, including AI. Its tech-savvy audiences and users are actively engaged in debating and speculating on the implications of technological advancements on society and the job market. This makes *r/futurology* an invaluable resource for examining how narratives around AI and its societal impacts are received and shaped by an informed audience or user. The mixed-method framework, combined with the targeted examination of discussions within the *r/futurology* subreddit, aligns well with the objectives to uncover how media imaginaries influence audience engagement and to trace the actions tech-savvy audiences and users undertake in response to AI narratives.

The structure of this thesis is as follows: Chapter 2 presents the theoretical frameworks and reviews existing research on AI technology and its perceived societal impacts, with a special focus on the perception of AI's role in job displacement. Chapter 3 outlines the mixed methods used to address the research questions. In Chapter 4, empirical materials are presented and analysed, delving into how social and media imaginaries contribute to shaping tech-savvy audiences and users' interpretations, understandings, and engagements with AI narratives about their impact on job displacement. Lastly, Chapter 5 synthesises the findings and offers recommendations for future research, particularly emphasising the need for further exploration of the interplay between media representation and public engagement with technological advancements.

³ *r/futurology* stands for 'Future(s) Studies: A subreddit devoted to the field of Future(s) Studies and evidence-based speculation about the development of humanity, technology, and civilisation' <https://www.reddit.com/r/Futurology/>

Chapter 2: Literature Review: Existing Research and Theoretical Frameworks

This chapter lays the theoretical groundwork for analysing the data collected. It delves into the essential theories and concepts that establish how audiences engage with AI narratives and perceive their impact on society. First, this literature review critically situates the investigation on two key areas: societal perceptions of AI technologies and AI's implications on job displacement. Then, it delves into the fundamental theories and concepts that direct the analysis of audiences and users engage with AI narratives: beginning with defining AI narratives in the context of this thesis as media entities, the sub-chapters then examine the concepts of social and media imaginaries to outline their role in contributing to shape audience engagement. The focus shifts to the dynamics of audience engagement, particularly examining the influence of emotions and feelings in a media-saturated environment. The chapter wraps up with a discussion on platforms and tech influencers, outlining their influence and how they are perceived in existing academic literature.

2.1. AI developments and the perceived societal impacts

A common perception of AI is that it is merely a set of algorithms and computational processes. Crawford (2021) argued that AI is deeply intertwined with various social, economic, and environmental factors. Technological advancements, particularly AI and other digital technologies, are believed to reshape the economy, work, and society. In Brynjolfsson and McAfee (2014) characterise this *inflection point* (2014, p. 6) as pivotal, emphasising the global transformative effects of digitisation.

Significant research has been conducted on AI and technological innovations, offering a detailed examination of the challenges and opportunities that AI development presents regarding societal impacts. Several studies assess AI developments under the *comparable impact* (Kaplan, 2015, p. 197) and dive into both positive and negative benefits.

Technological innovation brings potential benefits and global challenges in sustainability, health, security, and life enrichment (Juma, 2016). AI and digital connectivity improve global human conditions, with synthetic innovation serving as a critical driver of human progress, where AI acts as an essential catalyst. AI advancements can bring significant economic benefits, contributing to a safer, healthier, and more prosperous society (Kaplan, 2015).

To streamline the discussion of contrasting technological perspectives, Ellul's notion of technological determinism (1964) highlights how technology evolves independently and profoundly shapes society. Similarly, Winner (1968) discusses how technology dictates human actions and societal structures. On the other hand, Kelly (2010) views technology as a force expanding human possibilities, aligning with Friedman's views (2005) on technology driving economic growth and global opportunities, and Kurzweil's predictions (2005) about technology overcoming human biological limits. Udupa and Dattatreyan (2023) discussed about the *unsettling* affects (2023, pp. 3-4), which are complex emotional disturbances that arise when digital interfaces circulate content that provokes uncertainty or confronts societal norms. Such dynamics are crucial in how digital media influence social imaginaries, often disrupting traditional understandings and prompting deeper contemplation on the broader implications of digital communication.

Nonetheless, concerns are rising over technology's adverse impacts, including privacy breaches, social disruption, and the potential for AI to develop consciousness (Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2014). While advancements in AI may lead to a new era of prosperity and leisure, the transition might be severe without proper economic and regulatory adjustments. AI systems are critiqued for their role in societal structures, influencing and often worsening issues like privacy invasion, misinformation, and the erosion of democratic processes. This calls for reconsidering how AI is integrated into societal frameworks to prevent these adverse outcomes. Various dimensions of AI have impacted power, politics, and the environmental costs associated with its development and deployment (Crawford, 2021). Russell (2019) pointed out that though presenting, AI benefits are contrasted with the pressing need to address the immediate risks and ethical dilemmas of advancing AI technology.

While discussions about emerging technologies often concentrate on potential risks, it is essential also to recognise their positive aspects and transformative potential. According to Thompson (1995), technology profoundly influences social structures and cultural dynamics, suggesting that AI and automation could lead to unprecedented economic growth and enhanced quality of life (Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2014; Bostrom and Yudkowsky, 2014). Further, Wilson and Daugherty (2018) explore how AI can augment human capabilities, fostering a synergistic relationship rather than replacing human roles. Qiufan and Lee (2024) predict that AI will significantly alter our world in the coming decades, while Schmidt and Cohen (2013) highlight how digital innovations drive positive societal transformations.

Recognising these potentials enables a more balanced understanding of technology's impact on society. Media narratives that focus on these positive aspects, alongside educational content and community discussions facilitated by thought leaders on social platforms, help balance the imaginaries surrounding emerging technologies. This inclusive approach to discussing AI encourages a comprehensive understanding of its societal roles.

The problem of control and alignment of AI systems with human values has been one of the key concerns when it comes to how advanced AI technologies impact the future of humans (Benjamin, 2020; Bostrom and Yudkowsky, 2014; Cathy O'Neil, 2017; Hendrycks et al., 2020). AI and data-driven algorithms can perpetuate inequality, reinforce discrimination, and undermine societal fairness. Furthermore, corporations controlling AI and digital technologies pose significant risks to personal privacy and societal autonomy, influencing behaviours and decisions (Zuboff, 2019). Additionally, automated systems often risk encoding existing biases, such as gender and racial inequalities in college admissions or art recognition, thereby extending a lack of diversity and fairness unless human values are explicitly designed to reflect and uphold human values.

AI applications are expected to be more responsible and align with human rights and fairness standards. Rationality has been formalised regarding utility maximisation, where an agent's actions aim to achieve the best possible outcome according to a set of preferences. This approach has been central to AI research, guiding the development of systems that make optimal decisions under uncertainty (Russell, 2019, pp. 18-22). Ideology plays a role in shaping visions of AI and the future of society. Ideologies can serve the ruling class' material interests, propagating specific AI visions that may not align with broader societal needs. According to Verdegem (2021), the development and implementation of AI technologies should prioritise social justice, inclusivity, and the wider interests of society rather than merely advancing technological capabilities and serving the agendas of powerful stakeholders.

2.2. AI's implications on job displacement

Feenberg (2010) argues against the common perception of technology as neutral, suggesting that technologies embody the specific values and interests of the dominant social groups that

control their development and deployment. Rudolph, Tan and Tan (2023) claimed that technological innovations like AI technologies contribute to the constitution of societal issues, including discrimination, growing inequalities, potential technological unemployment, and existential risks to humanity. AI is portrayed as a disruptive force in the job market with the idea of socio-technical change and how disruptive technologies can lead to public controversies by changing the balance of winners and losers (Verdegem, 2021; Juma, 2016).

Key issues being explored in *socio-technical interactions* (Dignum, 2022, p. 1) include the implications of biases in AI-driven decisions, the moral decision-making capacity of autonomous vehicles, the ethical, legal, and social standing of robots, and the influence of AI on employment and the global economy (Dignum, 2022). Gruetzemacher and Whittlestone (2022) outline the societal impacts of AI into three distinct categories. First, narrowly transformative AI refers to specific, irreversible alterations within confined domains such as the military or education, exemplified by the revolutionary use of drones in altering military surveillance and combat tactics. Second, transformative AI encompasses broader, systemic changes that enhance core societal functions, akin to the societal shifts brought about by the advent of electricity or the internal combustion engine. This is observed in AI's role in industrial automation and data analytics, which change supply chains, maintenance, and decision-making, redefining productivity and employment landscapes. The third category, radically transformative AI, posits a future where AI could trigger changes as significant as those seen during the industrial revolutions⁴, potentially redefining human existence and societal structures through advancements that may reach or exceed human-level intelligence. This level of AI could profoundly alter work, creativity, and social interactions.

AI technologies are associated with labour exploitation, where increased productivity through automation and optimisation comes at the expense of worker rights and conditions. The introduction of automated systems has transformed work experiences, thereby reshaping the nature of work. The broad integration of information technology has markedly led to a division of job opportunities into high-skill, high-wage roles and low-skill, low-wage roles. Research indicates that responses to technological changes vary significantly depending on professional background and experience. Tiwari (2023) notes that experienced workers often

⁴ Industrial Revolutions: The 4 Industrial Revolutions: Coal in 1765, Gas in 1870, Electronics and Nuclear in 1969, Internet and Renewable Energy in 2000. From What are the 4 industrial revolutions? Available at: <https://upkeep.com/learning/four-industrial-revolutions/> (Accessed: 05 May 2024).

view these changes against the backdrop of economic cycles and previous technological disruptions, which may moderate their risk perceptions compared to those newer to the field. Jain (2023) suggests that more senior professionals may see AI advancements as a continuation of technological progress they have witnessed throughout their careers, making it potentially less threatening. Chen, Li, and Tang (2022) explore the psychological aspects of how workers perceive risks related to AI and automation. They highlight that individuals with more extensive career experience likely have a more nuanced understanding of the cyclic nature of job markets, influencing their perceptions of threats and opportunities presented by AI. This depth of experience enables senior professionals to develop more nuanced understandings and persuasive critiques based on a broader knowledge base. This shift highlights the impact of technological innovation on reshaping employment and the structure of occupations, mainly through replacing routine tasks with computers and automation (Autor, 2015). Additionally, the transition towards automation may reduce empathetic human interactions, essential in many professional environments (Susskind and Susskind, 2015).

Crawford (2021) presents a perspective where AI is comprised of human labour with the case study of the digital pieceworkers—the Amazon warehouse employees and Chicago meat labours where it highlights the increasing surveillance and control exerted over workers by AI systems. Crawford (2021) argues against the simplistic notion of robots replacing humans, instead exploring how human work is being redefined in the age of AI, often treating humans more like machines, consequently dehumanising and overworking employees. Kaplan (2015) draws a parallel between the rapid onset of global warming and the rapid advancements in AI, pointing out that the issue is not just the changes themselves but the fast pace at which they occur and humanity's ability to adapt. Such accelerated advancements may lead to social unrest, persistent unemployment, and escalating income inequality. 'The first is the simple truth that most automation replaces workers, so it eliminates jobs' (Kaplan, 2015, pp. 131-132). Recent advancements in AI are expected to accelerate technological change, uniquely disrupting our labour markets significantly. Lee (2019) discusses AI's implications for the global economy, addressing how advancements in AI will change the future of work and which nations might emerge as the new AI superpowers. Robotics, advanced life sciences, and the codification of money, markets, and trust are predicted to shape economic landscapes (Ross, 2017).

AI technologies are advancing rapidly in major global centres, profoundly influencing sectors including creative industries and IT, where they are poised to reshape and potentially compete with human labour (Lee, 2019). These technologies boost productivity and displace jobs, especially in areas involving creative and repetitive tasks (Damioli, Van Roy and Vertesy, 2021). In creative fields such as arts, fashion, and advertising, AI's ability to generate and alter content transforms traditional practises. Atkinson and Barker (2023) explore how AI is increasingly performing tasks once exclusive to humans, such as design generation and image modification, sparking concerns about its role in supplanting human creativity, mainly where it can autonomously produce content that rivals human efforts.

The emergence and fast development of Generative AI⁵ have expanded its capabilities to include writing, content creation, and data analysis; activities once thought to be solely human domains (Kimbrough and Carpanelli, 2023). Integrating AI into creative workflows redefines the nature of creativity, which does not exist in isolation but within communities defined by discipline and taste. As Atkinson and Barker (2023) emphasise, while AI can enhance and expand human creative capacity, it also presents significant challenges to established roles and practises in the creative industries, potentially reducing the need for human input in creating original works.

The dual impacts—both positive and negative—of technological innovations, particularly AI, on society are examined in a wide range of existing literature resources. These resources provide an in-depth examination of how these technologies are reshaping economic, professional, and societal landscapes, highlighting transformative effects and potential risks associated with AI development. This scholarly foundation serves as the critical backdrop for this thesis. It explores how media narratives about AI potentially replacing human labour influence audience engagement, tying to their emotions and feelings. Technological innovations such as AI are deeply interwoven with societal frameworks, particularly within the labour market, where they mutually influence and shape one another. A detailed discussion on the risks and benefits of AI is essential, stepping away from exaggerated and divided views to foster severe and informed conversations about the impact of AI. Bijker et

⁵ McKinsey (2023) *The state of AI in 2023: Generative AI's breakout year*. Available at: <https://mckinsey.com/capabilities/quantumblack/our-insights/the-state-of-ai-in-2023-generative-ais-breakout-year> (Accessed: 03 May 2024).

al. (1987) argue that a reciprocal relationship exists whereby insights from the history of technology and sociology can be informed by *knowledgeable machines* (1987, p. 329).

The discussions around AI extends beyond simple job displacement to consider broader economic and cultural transformations, such as changes in creative production, the global workforce and global economic balance. It can be deduced that the integration of AI into society is a complex, multi-faceted process that requires a nuanced understanding of both its capabilities and its challenges. This thesis highlights a critical gap in the current research landscape by focusing on the qualitative dimensions of how tech-savvy audiences and users engage with AI narratives about job displacement. While much of the existing scholarship emphasises AI's economic and technological aspects, more studies must explore the nuanced emotional and psychological impacts on audiences.

2.3. Imaginaries: social and media

Before examining how the concepts of imaginaries will be centre of this study, it is necessary to define what are AI narratives in the context of this thesis. AI narratives are conceptualised as the diverse collection of media materials—including article headlines, content within articles, social media posts by users, and other texts and visuals—that discuss AI development and innovations. These narratives are not merely informational; they are presented by media owners who could narrate AI as being responsible for either social benefit or as a threat, particularly on employment. According to McCombs and Shaw (1972), media guides what we think about and heavily influences our perspectives on these subjects. In the context of AI, media narratives can amplify concerns about job displacement or promote the potential for efficiency improvements and the creation of new job opportunities, thereby influencing societal reactions based on their chosen focus. Echoing Bijker (1995), the interpretations of technology are collectively constructed by social groups, including the media, and are continuously negotiated, resisted, and reinforced through media narratives. Consequently, narratives about AI are not merely absorbed passively; they are actively interpreted and reinterpreted by audiences, leading to a dynamic understanding of AI's perceived societal roles.

The theoretical frameworks guiding this study are rooted in Taylor's concept of social imaginaries (2003) and Chambers' media imaginaries (2016). Taylor describes social

imaginaries as the collective ways societies imagine their social existence, shaping perceptions and expectations about societal norms and practises. Chambers extends this to media imaginaries, focusing on how media technologies are envisioned and understood within cultural contexts, influencing societal values and interactions. In this thesis, these concepts are applied to AI narratives, examining how these implicate AI as either a beneficial force or a disruptive threat, especially regarding its impact on employment.

Illusion and delusion are fundamental aspects of social life, where all interactions carry an element of performance. Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) noted, 'Life is a constant performance; we are audience and performer at the same time; everybody is an audience all the time. Performance is not a discrete event.' (1998, p. 73). Imagination structures social activities, becoming both a form of labour and a medium through which individuals and communities engage with global possibilities. Social imaginaries are not just sets of ideas but are deeply embedded in the customs of a society. They enable and make sense of these customs, forming a widely shared sense of legitimacy among its members.

Taylor (2003) introduces the concept of *multiple modernities* (2003, p. 207), suggesting that various institutional changes such as bureaucratic states, market economies, science, and technology manifest differently across cultures and lead to diverse forms of modern social imaginaries. What we envision can foster new, constructive possibilities or, conversely, manifest as purely fictional and potentially harmful fabrications. We frequently engage with modern social imaginaries, which are no longer merely ideal concepts but are actively experienced by various populations, often laden with ideological and mistaken perceptions. However, recognising these social imaginaries is beneficial for identifying underlying ideologies and understanding their essential role: they enable and rationalise certain practises within societies. Thus, the inaccuracies inherent in these imaginaries are harmful, as they play a crucial role in shaping and facilitating societal functions and norms, echoing Taylor (2003): 'Like all forms of human imagination, the social imaginary can be full of self-serving fiction and suppression, but it also is an essential constituent of the real' (2003, p. 183).

The concept of media imaginaries, as explored by Chambers (2016) is central to the analyses and discussions within this thesis. 'The stage just before and during the widespread adoption of new technologies involves the process of media imaginary' (2016, p. 13). This stage of public deliberation involves the emergent popularisation of the technology that forms part of

public consciousness, sustaining the technology's social acceptance and widespread domestic adoption. Media imaginaries relate to societal values and fears and can be rooted in broader societal narratives, such as myths and collective imaginings. Media imaginaries are instrumental in adopting and domesticating new technologies, guiding the public's acceptance and integration by aligning them with familiar cultural and moral values. They not only frame technological advancements within accessible contexts but also balance the associated anxieties and aspirations. These imaginaries transform technological attributes into culturally significant narratives that align with prevailing social practises and values, covering the spectrum of expectations, fears, and fantasies tied to new media technologies.

Integrating technology into society's broader cultural framework, particularly through design and marketing, can provoke potential fears and anxieties regarding innovations. One can also connect to the framing aspect of media imaginaries and its role in the imagination phase of domesticating technology, where advertising ignites fascination and desire for new technologies, in this study's context, AI innovation. This phase involves a narrative construction that shapes the adoption and integration of technologies, such as AI, into everyday life (Chambers, 2016, p. 14).

Media imaginaries involve the ongoing negotiation of meaning between technology, culture, and society. In the case of AI, debates around job displacement is part of a larger conversation about the role of AI in society. This negotiation process influences how policies, regulations, and educational initiatives are developed in response to AI innovations' perceived threats and opportunities. By understanding media imaginaries, we gain insight into how media technologies are technical tools and cultural objects that carry substantial social and symbolic importance, shaping their perception and utilisation in public realms. It is essential to explore how these imaginaries are constructed, disseminated, and contested through various media forms: texts, sounds, visuals, motions, etc. Applying the concept of media imaginaries, this study will unpack the complex interplay between technology, culture, and societal reactions, providing a more comprehensive understanding of how people imagine and respond to the narratives about AI developments and job displacement.

These imaginaries concepts are crucial for understanding how AI imaginaries influence human emotions. It illustrates how narratives about AI and their artistic representations shape and are shaped by societal performances and collective imaginations. Abercrombie and

Longhurst (1998) argue that the contemporary world, which they view as a domain of spectacle, demands a strong capacity for imagination. Audiences must deploy considerable imaginative resources to engage with media, enhancing their perception of the world as aestheticised and full of symbolic meaning (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998, p. 100). This dynamic underpins the thesis' focus on how AI narratives influence public perceptions and actions concerning job displacement and societal integration of AI.

2.4. Audience engagement

2.4.1. Feelings and emotional engagement

Recent studies have broadened the exploration of emotions and affect—feelings or emotional responses associated with experiences—into new media, mainly social media platforms. These studies aim to uncover the everyday and ordinary emotions people commonly experience and express through digital interactions. This includes research on the expression of emotions through celebrity Facebook pages (Dilling-Hansen, 2015), YouTube videos (Soelmark, 2015), and other digital mediums, which also includes how people remember digital objects and how they connect through mobile phones (Mackley and Karpovich, 2012; Sirisena, 2012). This shift to understanding mundane, emotional interactions within digital spaces is critical for comprehending the nuances of human interactions in the digital era.

According to Beck (1992), modern societies are increasingly preoccupied with managing future uncertainties and risks, especially those associated with technological advancements. This preoccupation fosters a culture of individualisation and personal insecurity, as people are compelled to make reflexive decisions in the face of potential job displacements and economic upheavals caused by AI. Beck's analysis highlights how the risk associated with AI technologies can become a central element of public conversations, fuelling feelings of anxiety and uncertainty that dominate societal responses. On the other hand, Ellul (1964) argues that technological advancements are the primary drivers of societal changes, moulding cultural, political, and individual behaviours often beyond the control and anticipation of society. This deterministic view suggests that technological innovations like AI are not just tools but are agents that reconfigure social relations and emotional responses. Examining Beck's risk society and Ellul's technological determinism, AI can be assessed as a potent force that triggers societal and emotional transformations.

In this thesis, emotions and feelings related to AI and employment are examined from a sociological perspective, drawing particularly on the social theories of Burkitt (2009). Together with insights from Beck (1992) and Ellul (1964), this study positions emotions as deeply integrated within a broader social and technological context, rather than mere individual reactions. Burkitt (2009) argues that emotions are relational and develop within the interactions between individuals, shaped by societal frameworks and cultural contexts. This approach allows for a nuanced exploration of how AI impacts our emotional responses to job security and changes within the labor market, emphasizing that emotions are influenced by and reflective of broader societal dynamics.

Media platforms significantly influence these emotional landscapes by framing AI technologies either as threats, which can induce anxiety and insecurity, or as opportunities, which might foster optimism and acceptance among the public. This framing is crucial as it can shape public sentiment and subsequently influence behaviors and decision-making processes related to employment. The role of media in shaping emotional responses underscores Burkitt's assertion that emotions are socially constructed. This thesis explores how AI narratives, mediated through various platforms, contribute to shaping audiences and users' emotions. Such an exploration is vital for understanding the comprehensive impact of AI on society, especially concerning employment, where emotional reactions play a crucial role in how individuals and communities respond to technological advancements.

Finally, media engagement itself is an emotionally charged experience encompassing a range of feelings from moral passion to fear, which profoundly affects how narratives about AI are received and processed (Dahlgren and Hill, 2022, p. 15). This emotional dimension of media engagement is critical for understanding the complex interplay between technology narratives and societal responses.

Integrating technology, particularly AI, into the fabric of society often amplifies or diminishes human characteristics such as patience, bias, and curiosity (Chamorro-Premuzic, 2023). The current AI revolution, often called the fourth industrial revolution, is claimed to enhance and degrade human capabilities. 'Fear of job displacement by technological innovation is not new' (Kimbrough and Carpanelli, 2023). Instances such as the rise of the Internet and its role in driving digital transformation illustrate this ongoing pattern. Over the last century, technological introductions have disrupted established industries and

professions, such as replacing traditional bank tellers with automated teller machines (ATMs) and changing from postal to electronic mail. These technological shifts initially sparked concerns over job losses and industry disruption.

Juma (2016) highlights that concerns about the impacts of technology often stem from a perceived sense of loss rather than actual adverse impacts, noting, 'Much of the concern is driven by the perception of loss, not necessarily by concrete evidence of loss,' (2016, p. 11). This fear of perceived loss encompasses more than just economic setbacks; it extends to intellectual and psychological realms, challenging established worldviews and personal identities. These fears are rooted in tangible outcomes, like job eliminations and economic downturns, and intangible effects, such as shifts in societal roles or erosion of traditional skills. As innovations drive efficiency and wealth redistribution, they can diminish demand for certain types of labour and centralise economic power, intensifying societal unease and resistance to change:

One of the biggest fears people have when new technologies are introduced is becoming unemployed. This is often a genuine concern. New technologies tend to be more efficient and therefore require less manual labour. (Juma, 2016, p. 203)

Russell (2019) explores the notion of *the inchoate fears* (2019, p. 79) associated with superintelligent machines, considering the real possibility that such entities might dominate or even threaten humanity. This interplay between emerging technologies and fear is further examined in Stivers' work (2004), which discusses how technological advancement often correlates with a decline in shared moral values, fostering a subtle yet pervasive sense of powerlessness. In this context, AI, as an emerging technology, particularly influences public perception and emotional response to its integration into society and the labour market. In contrast, others might evoke trauma and exclusion, both as individuals and within community contexts (Gray, 2021, p. 78).

To examine how audiences approach, digest and interpret narratives about AI development and their perceived societal impacts on employment, Rogers' theory of the diffusion of innovation (1983) will be employed to elaborate on the predictable pattern through which new ideas and technologies are adopted across different social groups. The theory posits that adopting new technologies follows a sequence characterised by several key stages:

knowledge, persuasion, decision, implementation, and confirmation (1983, pp. 163-209). This framework can be particularly useful in analysing how different audience segments come to understand, evaluate, and potentially accept AI technologies in relation to their impact on employment. The *knowledge* stage involves audiences first becoming aware of AI advancements. At the same time, *persuasion* sees them forming attitudes towards these technologies — either positive or negative — based on perceived benefits or threats to job security. During the decision phase, individuals or groups accept or reject AI based on this understanding, leading to *implementation*, where the technology is used, and finally, *confirmation*, where the decision is reinforced or reconsidered based on the outcomes.

Rogers (1983) also emphasises key factors influencing technology adoption: relative advantage, complexity, observability, compatibility, and trialability (1983, pp. 230-238). These elements explain how technologies like AI are perceived and integrated within different contexts. For example, the adoption of AI is facilitated when its benefits are clear (relative advantage), its functions align with current practises (compatibility), and potential users can test it (trialability). Conversely, perceived complexity and unclear benefits (observability) can hinder acceptance. These concepts are pivotal in studying media narratives around AI, illustrating the need for audiences to possess media literacy skills to navigate and critically evaluate these complex technological discussions effectively.

Rogers' diffusion of innovation theory (1983) provides a valuable framework for understanding the varying acceptance rates of AI narratives among different societal groups. Engagement are critical in explaining experience. For instance, sectors that perceive clear advantages and compatibility with existing technologies are quicker to integrate and promote positive AI narratives. In contrast, groups facing high complexity and low observability of benefits might exhibit resistance or slower adoption rates. The application of Rogers' theory helps illuminate why certain segments of society may resist or delay embracing AI. Those with less technical knowledge or whose current practises may be disrupted by AI will likely view these changes with scepticism. Meanwhile, technologically savvy individuals and industries that stand to benefit directly from AI's efficiencies are more inclined to advocate for its rapid integration.

2.4.2. Engagement in media studies

In contemporary media studies, understanding audience engagement requires a nuanced approach that moves beyond the simplistic dualism between rationality and emotionality. Dahlgren and Hill's work (2022) offers a comprehensive framework that integrates affect, emotion, and reason as intertwined elements in media interactions. They argue that engagement is neither a rational or cognitive process nor an emotional reaction; instead, it is the fusion of these aspects that enriches theoretical understanding and empirical analysis of media practices (2022, pp. 14-15). A more inclusive understanding that recognises how emotional responses and rational considerations co-present in shaping individual and collective actions toward media narratives.

Further exploring the role of emotions in media engagement, Dahlgren and Hill (2022) highlight how news consumption intertwines rational understanding with emotional resonance. Audiences engage more deeply with news that they find emotionally compelling or relevant, suggesting that emotions play a crucial role in how information is processed and acted upon. This dual involvement of cognitive and affective responses is critical for comprehending how individuals form opinions and make decisions based on media narratives. This perspective is essential for analysing media through the lenses of injustice, resilience, or social equality, as it acknowledges the complex factors that influence media engagement. To broaden the discussion, recent studies, such as Couldry and Hepp (2017), suggest that social engagement with media is increasingly mediated by digital platforms, further complicating the interaction between personal and mediated experiences. Media systems have become deeply integrated into everyday life, significantly altering our perceptions and interactions.

Understanding engagement parameters is crucial to developing a comprehensive framework that connects the previous discussions on media roles and audience reactions, deeper diving into how different engagement factors affect audience perceptions and behaviours. The five parameters of media engagement framework (Dahlgren and Hill, 2020) offers a nuanced approach to analysing audience interactions with media narratives. The analysis will start with understanding the context within which media engagement occurs and how the audiences approached and interpreted the narratives about AI development. *Context* involves the backdrop of personal, societal, and economic factors that define media consumption. For

example, in societies where technological disruptions in the job market are prevalent, media narratives about AI might resonate more deeply, influencing how these narratives are interpreted and discussed. The economic conditions, cultural attitudes towards technology, and levels of media literacy are all contextual elements that shape the engagement and interpretation of media content. Personal anxieties about job security can drive *motivations* in an automating world, a professional interest in staying abreast of technological trends, or a broader societal concern about the ethical implications of AI. Understanding these motivations is crucial as they dictate the depth and nature of media engagement. For instance, someone directly impacted by AI in their job might seek narratives that validate their experiences and provide insights into navigating future challenges. Alternatively, a policymaker might focus on narratives discussing AI's regulatory and ethical aspects to inform decision-making processes. Simultaneously, the motivations parameter explores why audiences engage with these narratives: '...motivations behind engagement can take into account pleasure, such as relaxation, escapism, romance, or eroticism, which draws upon affect and emotionality' (Dahlgren and Hill, 2020, p. 15).

Modalities refer to how audiences process and engage with media content. This includes cognitive aspects, where individuals critically analyse the information; affective responses, where emotional reactions to content occur; and communicative practises, where discussions or sharing happen. For example, audiences might engage cognitively with AI narratives by comparing different sources to gauge the reliability of the information; affectively by experiencing fear or hope concerning AI's impact on jobs, and communicatively by discussing these impacts in online forums or social networks. The *intensities* of engagement describe the depth and fervour with which audiences engage with content. This can range from passive reception of information to active advocacy or protest against perceived negative impacts of AI. Intensity affects how profoundly media narratives influence individual and collective behaviours, potentially leading to substantial societal changes in engagement. In the final section of the analysis, the parameter *consequences* of engagement will be applied to detail the outcomes that arise from interacting with media. These can be personal, such as changes in an individual's understanding or attitudes towards AI and its societal roles; or collective, such as shifts in public opinion or societal norms about the balance between technology and employment.

Together, these parameters create a comprehensive picture of how media narratives about AI and employment are consumed and integrated into life's personal and public spheres. It will also offer valuable insights for both media producers and policymakers aiming to navigate the challenges presented by AI in the workforce. This approach enriches the analysis of media audience engagement and clarifies the complex interplay between media narratives and societal responses to technological change.

Building on the discussion of media engagement, the role of media literacy becomes crucial in contributing to shape how audiences interact with AI narratives and their perceived impacts. Media literacy allows audiences to critically analyse the content they encounter, distinguishing between credible information and potential misinformation. Potter (2010) highlights that media literacy not only involves decoding media content but also understanding the contexts in which media is produced and the motives behind it. This skill is essential in navigating discussions around AI, especially given the complex and polarised nature of these narratives.

Hobbs (2011) further argues that media literacy enhances public engagement by enabling individuals to participate in informed discussions and make decisions grounded in a thorough understanding of the narratives they engage with. In the context of AI, a media-literate public can critically evaluate the biases and authenticity of different sources and their portrayals of AI's societal impacts. This critical capacity helps foster a more balanced public discussion, encouraging nuanced discussions about the future of work in an AI-driven economy. Media literacy is fundamental to developing a critical understanding of how AI narratives are framed and disseminated in the media. This critical understanding is crucial for engaging with and influencing the discussion on AI and employment, ensuring that it reflects a comprehensive and balanced view of the potential challenges and opportunities presented by AI technologies.

2.5. Platforms and facilitators

2.5.1. The role of media platforms in disseminating AI narratives

The media's affective nature, especially on social media, effectively merges opinion, fact, and emotion, creating a highly engaging environment. These affective narratives, which blend

these elements, not only shape current imaginaries but also subtly guide future directions through anticipatory expressions (Papacharissi, 2015). Moreover, advancements in AI technologies like natural language processing and computer vision have revolutionised our interaction with digital media (Kumar and Jain, 2021). Rogers' diffusion of innovation theory (1983) further explains how AI developments spread throughout society via media channels, impacting how imaginaries about AI's affect on employment spread across different audience segments. Media platforms, alongside influencers and specialised news outlets, play a pivotal role in this process by shaping the narratives' reception and emphasising certain features to influence public perceptions and societal imaginaries. Social media channels contribute a critical role as venues for media organisations to distribute news and as access points for audiences seeking information (Hase, Boczek and Scharnow, 2023). Academics define social media through various lenses, with Hermida et al. emphasising its participatory, open, dialogical, communal, and interconnected nature (Hermida et al., 2012, p. 311). This shift towards the platformisation of news marks the rise of digital infrastructures that reshape how news is produced, published, and interacted with, profoundly altering the news landscape (Hase, K. and Scharnow, 2023; van Dijck et al., 2018, Ekström and Westlund, 2019).

The discussions around AI often overlook power structures, digital capitalism, ideology, and how social struggles are influenced by digital and social media (Verdegem, 2021). Digital communication shapes societal attitudes towards technological innovation (Udupa and Dattatreyan, 2023). The power of digital media lies in its ability to guide public opinion on technological innovations through the visibility and virality mechanisms inherent in these platforms, as illustrated in the excerpt below:

They [digital] mobilise and rework existing networks to shape a diverse range of activities. These mediated networks do not represent a single technological process or artifact, nor are they mere technological extensions. They are embodied and affective constellations within specific political economies that we reflexively navigate through. (Udupa and Dattatreyan, 2023, p. 3)

The expansion of communication channels has not only increased the complexity of our world but also its unpredictability, magnifying the role of media in facilitating distant interactions and responses (Thompson, 1995). This evolution of media underscores the proactive and critical engagement of audiences who are increasingly able to interpret media

in diverse and personally meaningful ways. The notion of the active audience challenges traditional models of media influence, highlighting the creative agency of individuals in constructing interpretations (Corner, 2011). This diversity in engagement reflects a broad spectrum of possible understandings arising from any media interaction, emphasising the personalised nature of media consumption.

Furthermore, the concept of information overload explores the challenges posed by the abundance of information, which complicates the audience's ability to process and make decisions (Eppler and Mengis, 2004). This overload can impede critical analysis and in-depth engagement with content, suggesting a pressing need for enhanced media literacy. Such literacy empowers audiences to navigate through the vast data, fostering an ability to establish personal and insightful connections with the information they encounter (Hayles, 2007).

The interplay among individuals, media activities, and societal frameworks extends beyond the familiar ideas of media *impact* and *influence* (Corner, 2011, p. 115). 'Societal frameworks' refer to the established social structures and cultural norms shaped by imaginaries and media narratives. They encompass the regulatory, economic, and ethical dimensions influencing media production, engagement, and interpretation within different communities. Castells' theory of communication power explains the dynamic power relationships embedded within these frameworks, illustrating the complex interactions between technology, media, and societal control (Castells, 2009). The term 'societal frameworks' acknowledges the complex backdrop against which media and individuals interact, highlighting the nuanced ways in which media does not simply affect society but is an integral part of its ongoing evolution. In the context of this study, AI narratives play an indispensable role in shaping societal consciousness and how realities are perceived by audiences of all ages, highlighting the need for a nuanced grasp of their implications. This perspective challenges the assumption of individual autonomy by illustrating how deeply media narratives can penetrate and shape personal and collective decision-making processes, echoing Corner (2011):

It is a mistake – one still made – to see interpretative variations as the result of the application of sharply individualised rather than socially induced frameworks of understanding, since

how we ‘read’ media products is in large part how our social development and position encourage us to read them. (Corner, 2011, p. 93)

2.5.2. Opinion leaders in tech industry

Burkitt’s work (2008) explores how globalisation and the decline of traditional structures of society deeply influence personal identities. As traditional life paths become less predictable, individuals find themselves needing to continually rewrite their life narratives to adapt to ever-changing social landscapes. Identity is not static but fluid, varying across social relations and historical contexts. This notion is particularly relevant in examining how individuals navigate shifts between various roles and identities, especially in the face of significant life changes such as job loss. Such a transition often triggers a profound sense of helplessness and can precipitate an identity crisis as individuals struggle to redefine their roles without employment. In these uncertain times, the support and guidance of experts are often sought to manage the existential anxieties of navigating through risk-filled circumstances. ‘Those who have sought solitude to find themselves’ (Burkitt, 2008, p. 3).

‘Digital influencers’ (Locatelli, 2021; Wielki, 2020) have increasingly become pivotal in circulating narratives about the development of AI technologies. Essentially, these individuals are opinion leaders within communities enthusiastic about and working in technology. They play a crucial role in mediating between mass media and the public, often by filtering and interpreting information for their peers. What distinguishes these opinion leaders but is their active communication role within their networks. They engage in activities such as promoting specific viewpoints or providing advice on industry matters. Found across various social layers, they are critical players in the two-step flow of information (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, 1968), absorbing media content from mass media and translating it into more accessible forms for others. The social imaginary discussed earlier is the shared understanding that enables standard practises and fosters a broad sense of legitimacy among the community. The influence of these opinion leaders is critical in shaping collective opinion, as they actively participate in media and interpersonal communication, helping to solidify emerging views within the community and fostering a cohesive public opinion during pivotal moments, echoing Taylor (2003): ‘It often happens that what starts off as theories held by a few people come to infiltrate the social imaginary, first of elites, perhaps, and then of the whole society,’ (2003, p. 24).

Techfluencers, shortened from ‘technology influencers’, these opinion leaders in technology sectors, illustrate the strategic construction of professional identities in the digital landscape. Their work of the impression management (Goffman, 1959) involves carefully curated public personas that these influencers use to influence their audiences. They provide insights and advice and craft an image that resonates with and inspires their followers, shaping perceptions and driving industry trends. This process is further complicated and enriched by the continuous interplay between personal identity and professional roles, as outlined by Kowalski and Leary (1990) and Roberts (2005). The deliberate construction of professional identity in the digital environment is a dynamic, ongoing process that demands these techfluencers to constantly adapt and refine their public personas to maintain relevance and influence. The role of techfluencers in shaping AI narratives also is considered in this study. As mediators of information, techfluencers can amplify particular perspectives about AI, leveraging their platforms to influence public opinion subtly or overtly. They often frame AI narratives in ways that reflect their own understanding and biases, which could either align with or contest the dominant media narratives.

2.6. Summary

The literature review chapter critically explores the relationship between AI and its perceived effects on job displacement, drawing on Taylor’s social imaginaries and Chambers’ media imaginaries. These theoretical frameworks are key to understanding how societal norms and media representations influence public perceptions of AI technologies. Additionally, Rogers’ diffusion of innovation theory sheds light on the dissemination of AI narratives through various media channels and their impact on different audience segments.

This chapter further delves into media audience engagement, using Dahlgren and Hill's parameters of engagement to analyse interactions with AI narratives across digital platforms. It underscores significant gaps in existing research, particularly the lack of focus on the emotional and psychological dimensions of media engagement. The role of media literacy is also examined, highlighting its importance in helping audiences critically analyse and interpret AI narratives amidst rapid technological changes.

By synthesising insights from social sciences and media studies, the review not only frames the communicative and societal dimensions of AI but also prepares the groundwork for a

detailed exploration of how AI narratives affect public debates and individual understanding of technological advancements. This comprehensive approach is crucial for navigating the complexities of media influence and societal transformation in the digital age.

Chapter 3: Research Methods

This chapter outlines the research methods used to investigate how tech-savvy audiences and users engage with and interpret AI narratives regarding job displacement. It describes the recruitment process, the interview methodology, and the selection of a specific Reddit discussion thread for detailed analysis. The chapter explains the mixed-method approach, combining qualitative interviews with thematic analysis of an online discussion on the subreddit r/futurology, to capture a broad range of perspectives on the societal impacts of AI. This methodological framework supports a comprehensive examination of both personal experiences and broader societal discussion.

3.1. Recruitment process

Qualitative research facilitated an empirical exploration of how audiences derive meaning from media while positioning the researcher as an interpretive agent (Jensen, 2011). The subreddit r/futurology was where I looked for this study's participants. Interviewing Reddit users with semi-structured interview was the first method to explore how tech-savvy audiences and users engage with and understand AI narratives about job displacement. I aimed for in-person meetings since through conversation, we gain insights into others' lives, uncovering their experiences, feelings, hopes, and the worlds they live in (Kvale, 2007, p. 2). This method aimed to reveal how these users, as audiences of AI narratives, incorporate such information into their daily lives, their interpretations of its societal implications, particularly concerning employment, and how they translate these perceptions into actions. Semi-structured interviews are known for their flexibility, allowing for exploring emerging themes throughout the conversation (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015).

The tech-savvy audiences were recruited carefully to include audiences and users who are interested in technology and AI discussions. The criteria focused on professionals aged between 27 and 47—spanning the rise of digital technologies and their integration into everyday life. This age range also captures a demographic likely experienced in their fields yet potentially vulnerable to technological disruptions. Interest in technological innovations,

especially AI, was a condition, along with a professional background in industries perceived as highly affected by AI advancements: workers in creative fields such as copywriters, translators, marketing professionals, etc. and professionals in the information technology sectors. The requirement that audiences be based in Stockholm, Sweden, facilitated face-to-face discussions, enhancing the depth of conversational insights. Recruitment was conducted via a post on r/futurology, which drew significant interest.

The selection of tech-savvy audiences from creative fields such as content creation, writing, marketing, and information technology was strategic, reflecting sectors perceived as highly vulnerable to AI-induced changes. Professionals in these areas are often at the forefront of integrating new technologies into their workflows, making them highly informed and directly impacted by AI advancements. The creative industries, in particular, are undergoing rapid transformation due to AI's ability to automate creative processes and generate content, presenting opportunities and threats to traditional roles (Boden, 2016). This perception is further emphasised by research such as Bessen (2019), which highlights that AI and automation will likely replace tasks traditionally performed by creatives and potentially engender new forms of artistic expression and marketing strategies. Additionally, individuals in IT are not only implementers but also primary users of AI technologies, providing a dual perspective on both the technical underpinnings and the practical implications of AI at work (Ford, 2015).

3.2. Conducting the interviews

A pilot interview was conducted to refine the interview guide. Following its success and the audience's consent to use their responses, minimal adjustments were made to the interview questions. Eleven more interviews were completed between February 1 and February 20, 2024. Conducted in person in Stockholm, Sweden, the interviews varied in length, with the majority around 35 minutes, the shortest at about 25 minutes, and the longest at nearly 65 minutes. The importance of conducting interviews in person is emphasised by Rubin and Rubin (1995), who note that this approach enhances the sensitivity and attention to interpersonal dynamics. Acknowledging the impracticality of maintaining complete neutrality, Seale et al. (2004) advocate adopting a stance of naturalistic engagement without claiming an unbiased position. This approach provided a rich array of insights into how

tech-savvy audiences and users engage with and act on narratives at the intersection of technology and employment.

The interview process commenced with a brief overview of the audiences' professional backgrounds and their interest in the topic. This initial discussion helped me delve into their understanding and interpretation of these narratives, particularly their thoughts on the perceived risk of job displacement by AI technologies. We then explored the emotional aspects of their responses, both in real-life settings and within the Reddit community. Additionally, we discussed each audience's engagement with AI technologies to gain insight into the origins of their interests, their focus on specific AI technologies, and the extent of AI integration in their daily lives, including professional settings. The questionnaire, though structured, was used flexibly, primarily serving as a guide to ensure comprehensive coverage of all relevant topics, echoing van Zoonen (2003), 'the final aim remains to reconstruct people's experiences and interpretations on their own terms' (2003, p. 137).

The ethical conduct of the interviews was rigorously maintained. All audiences were thoroughly briefed on the study's objectives, and the consent form (Appendix 2) was signed before participation. Participation was voluntary, with assurances that audiences could withdraw, refuse to answer specific questions or terminate the interview at any time. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained, ensuring audiences' data was used solely for research purpose.

Following the guidance of Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), I periodically summarised and clarified the responses during the interviews to confirm my understanding aligned with their intentions. This process helped validate the data's accuracy. Furthermore, the potential for generalising these results is limited due to the qualitative nature of the study. This research employs analytical generalisation, basing conclusions on theoretical arguments rather than empirical frequency.

3.3. Data collection for a second method

The complex dynamics of audience engagement with AI narratives necessitate more than one method. To gather rich empirical data and to outline how audiences engage with AI narratives across online and offline environments, I selected a particularly active discussion thread from the subreddit r/futurology to gain more insights for the analysis. In Reddit, discussion threads

are central to how users interact and share information. Each thread starts with an original post that introduces a topic, followed by a series of comments and replies from other users. These threads are organised within specific communities known as subreddits, each dedicated to a particular subject or interest. In the subreddit r/futurology, users frequently post and share articles related to advancements in technology, including artificial intelligence. This common activity not only provides a rich source of updated and diverse information but also stimulates engagement among the community. As members interact with these posts through comments and discussions, they delve into the implications and nuances of the topics presented, fostering a collaborative and dynamic environment for exploring futuristic concepts and theories. This interaction enhances the depth and breadth of conversations, making r/futurology a vibrant forum for discussing the future of technology and society. The chosen thread, titled ‘Klarna says its AI assistant does the work of 700 people after it laid off 700 people’⁶, gained many comments and reactions shortly after its publication. I maintained the platform’s default top comments setting to focus on the intricate engagement details that this secondary research method aimed to clarify.

Introducing a second method allows for a more detailed examination of audience engagement. The objective was first to identify recurring themes and patterns of engagement among Reddit users, then compare these with findings from interview data. The following step involves synthesising data from interviews and Reddit comments. This approach was designed to ensure that the analysis yields deep and broad insights. The discussions on the subreddit r/futurology can be seen as a smaller representation of the broader debates surrounding the narrative of AI and automation in society. The study analysed the comments and discussions and explored how different hegemonic ideas (e.g., techno-optimism, neoliberal labour practises) were contested or reinforced. Audience engagement here becomes an arena for challenging or upholding certain dominant narratives, including AI narratives, on which this research is focused.

The subreddit r/futurology itself, with its focus on future studies and speculative technology, represents a specific community with shared interests. User engagement on discussion threads can be understood as an expression of the community’s collective identity, values,

⁶ Klarna says its AI assistant does the work of 700 people after it laid off 700 people. Available at: <https://www.fastcompany.com/91039401/klarna-ai-virtual-assistant-does-the-work-of-700-humans-after-layoffs> (Accessed: 05 May 2024).

and how they envision the future of work and technology. The comments from Reddit users engaging with this headline and the article can be analysed as expressions of broader societal anxieties about job security, AI's role in the workplace, and corporate responsibility. There is also a possible presentation of counter-hegemonic perspectives, where individuals push back against prevailing norms (such as the inevitability of AI replacing human jobs). Therefore, deeper insights into societal views on technology, work, and the future can be revealed, highlighting the complex interplay between individual experiences, media narratives, and broader cultural and societal dynamics.

This thread was critically relevant to research design for multiple reasons: its headline directly relates to the core issue of this study—the perception of AI's potential to replace human workers. Additionally, Klarna's characteristics as a tech company established in Sweden connect directly to my Stockholm-based tech-savvy audiences (the interviewees). The discussion was initiated by sharing the online article with the same headline, directly tying into the study's focus. These factors made the thread an invaluable part of gathering empirical data. I noted the expressions of emotions and the debates surrounding AI's impact on employment, identifying recurring patterns and preliminary findings. Observations and analyses of these discussions reveal patterns of emotion and debate that echo findings from the interviews.

3.3. Transcribing, organising data and coding progress

Each interview was transcribed using the Slack application⁶, yielding twelve detailed documents. This experience proved both intriguing and relevant. Despite the utility of the transcription tool, the initial transcriptions of the interviews were plagued by numerous inaccuracies and repetitive phrases, as a result of AI technology. Consequently, I had to conduct a thorough review for each interview, revisiting the recordings to correct grammatical and wording errors manually.

As I progressed with the transcription of the interviews, specific patterns began to surface. Concurrently, I undertook a preliminary thematic analysis, systematically identifying significant excerpts during transcription. Qualitative data analysis is inherently repetitive (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2010), and my approach follows this iterative nature. Through thorough examination and iterative readings of these transcripts, I employed open coding

techniques (Seale, 2012) to define predominant themes. Repeatedly reviewing the data and annotating the transcriptions enriched my understanding of the dialogues. These annotations were then integrated into a digital spreadsheet to facilitate an overarching analysis. To ensure accuracy, I occasionally revisited the audio recordings to contextualise the quotations accurately.

In this study, Reddit comments and interview transcriptions serve as distinct but complementary data sources, each providing unique insights into audience engagement with AI narratives. The Reddit comments were systematically organised into a separate document to facilitate a detailed comparative analysis with the interview data. By synthesising both sets of data into a unified codebook, the analysis could identify recurring themes and patterns, as well as notable differences, thereby broadening the understanding of the subject matter.

While the interviews offer in-depth personal experiences and perceptions, providing nuanced insights into individual attitudes towards AI and its impact on job displacement, the Reddit discussions capture a broader, collective response that reflects community-based perspectives. This methodological approach allows for a multifaceted analysis, where insights from personal narratives are contextualised within the wider public discussion observed on Reddit. Despite their differences in scope and engagement style, integrating these data sources enables a more comprehensive examination of how tech-savvy audiences and users interpret, react to, and discuss AI narratives. This dual analysis strategy not only highlights the diversity of views within the tech community but also underscores the complex interplay between individual experiences and collective expressions in shaping public understanding of AI's societal impacts.

The coding process led to the organisation of the data into three primary categories, each comprising several sub-themes (Appendix 3). The first category addresses AI narrative consumption, detailing AI narratives' distribution, engagement, and influence on audience perceptions concerning AI's societal implications. The subsequent category focuses on audience engagement, analysing their reactions, the intensity of their interactions, and the motivations behind their engagement or lack thereof. The final category examines tech-savvy audiences' actions in response to their interpretations of AI narratives and their perceived societal impacts.

In the upcoming chapter that presents and analyses the empirical data, interview participants will be referred to by numerical identifiers followed by their age, for instance, ‘Interviewee #1, 41’. A comprehensive list of all interview details can be accessed in Appendix 3.

Sometimes they are mentioned as ‘participants’ for the flexibility of wording. Similarly, Reddit comments will be attributed to identifiers like ‘Reddit User #1’ to maintain the anonymity of the participants while providing a clear reference for the data discussed.

Chapter 4: Analysis: The imaginaries constructed around AI narratives

This chapter seeks to bridge the gap between perception and reality by exploring the interplay of media representations and public interpretations that form AI imaginaries. Drawing on the concepts of media and social imaginaries, this analysis examines how technology influencers contribute to shaping and disseminate specific views of AI. These figures can either amplify fears or highlight AI's benefits, profoundly affecting public perception. This exploration is crucial to understanding the nuanced ways AI narratives are constructed, resonate, and influence societal expectations, unpacking the complex relationship between technology, media, and society.

4.1. AI narratives: the distribution and engagement

4.1.1. The diffusion of AI narratives

Digitalisation has revolutionised traditional media's efficiency, scalability and diverse formats. We are now in an era of boundary-less information flow, where content is globalised, and media formats have become universal within a *ramified and complex* (Thompson, 1995, p. 78) global communication and information processing system. The rise of AI and associated technologies is reshaping our societal frameworks, altering communication dynamics, and transforming individual perceptions. The narrative surrounding AI's progression and its perceived impacts on society constructs a kind of imagination. This imagination plays a pivotal role in ongoing public and private discussions concerning the values and significances attributed to new technologies. These imaginaries not only fuel the integration of AI innovations into everyday life by contributing to sharpening the perceptions and applications of these technologies but also mark the initial stages of a technology's introduction to society. Echoing Chambers (2016), they are key in crafting a sense of novelty and visualising or imagining the transformative possibilities of technology within the public consciousness.

In this study, individuals engage with AI narratives based on their observations, resonating with broader experiences where media plays a significant role in shaping public and personal perceptions of AI. Interviewee #5 points out the influence of media narratives on personal views: 'I saw those headlines about AI technologies replacing human jobs in the media and social media. Does it affect my view of AI's benefits to society? Yes, it does, and I think

anyone who says it doesn't is either not aware of it or actively lying to themselves.' He then emphasises: 'It would not be an active discussion without the involvement of the media'.

This statement highlights the need for a critical approach to media engagement, encouraging individuals to form their own informed opinions rather than passively accepting the perspectives presented.

Interviewee #4 emphasises the pivotal role of digital platforms in today's information-rich environment, where content is algorithmically selected and delivered across various channels such as social media, news feeds, online articles, blogs, podcasts, and newsletters. For example, interviewee #4 described how tailored news feeds on X (formerly Twitter) focused on business developments in AI act as a primary information source. Interviewee #10 noted that following official pages on LinkedIn or international news sites like TechCrunch⁷ or Reuters⁸ provides updates on significant technological advancements.

In corporate settings, access to detailed discussions about AI is often exclusive to employees, maintaining a narrative stream within specific companies. This exclusivity is facilitated through restricted access systems that require company credentials to access platforms sharing critical updates and debates about AI's potential and effectiveness compared to human labour. For example, interviewee #1 said he frequently checked his company's AI-focused Slack⁹ channel '#ai'¹⁰, which offers curated content directly relevant to their work. Similarly, Interviewee #7 receives frequent internal communications about AI projects, illustrating the targeted and internalised nature of AI information dissemination within corporate environments. These channels ensure that relevant information reaches those directly involved in AI, fostering a deeper, context-specific understanding among the workforce.

⁷ TechCrunch is a technology news website that focuses on high tech and startup companies. It covers a wide range of topics including the latest in technology news, product launches, startup funding announcements, and trends in the tech industry.

⁸ Reuters is a major international news organization, known for providing news to media outlets around the world. It is part of the larger Thomson Reuters Corporation and is highly respected for its commitment to unbiased and comprehensive reporting.

⁹ Slack is a cloud-based team communication platform developed by Slack Technologies. More information can be found at <https://slack.com/>

¹⁰ A Slack channel is 'a focused and organised way to communicate within the Slack platform. It allows users to dwell deeper into a specific message by creating a threaded conversation'. More information is available at: <https://www.wishup.co/blog/how-to-start-a-thread-on-slack/> (Accessed: 05 May 2024).

The integration of media narratives into professional environments shows how digital platforms have transformed media consumption. According to Jarvis (2007), the flexibility to access media narratives anytime and from anywhere changing how imaginaries are engaged, not only in personal settings but also in professional environments. Employees access a variety of content anytime and from anywhere, directly influencing their professional engagements. Integrating media into professional settings not only transforms access and consumption patterns but also emphasises the importance of media literacy and organisational communication. Scholars like Hobbs (2011) and Potter (2010) argue that strategic media skills are crucial for enhancing professional knowledge and business strategies, while effective information dissemination within organisations fosters improved decision-making and innovation.

In this digitally mediated era, tech-savvy users frequently encounter AI narratives through algorithmically curated content, leading to complex emotional responses, magnifying *unsettling* affects (Udupa and Dattatreyan, 2023, pp. 3-4), which refer to emotional responses that are disconcerting or disturbing, challenging our sense of comfort and predictability. For instance, a discussion on Reddit illustrates how users critically engage with such content:

Reddit user #97: ‘Why not read the article to confirm first? They claim it has just as high customer satisfaction as a human.’ In response, several Reddit users respond as below:

Reddit user #98: ‘**They claim**¹¹ is the key phrase there. Take what a company says at face value when it very obviously benefits them to say it or use slightly more critical thinking and realise it is almost certainly some kind of lie?’

Reddit user #99: ‘Why would you trust their metrics to be valid or for their self reporting to be an honest appraisal of the pros and cons? This is an advertisement made out of carefully selected results from made up metrics. I don’t take it very seriously.’

The third response reminds the network environment they are in: ‘Because r/futurology isn’t ‘evidence-based speculation about the development of humanity, technology, and civilisation’ as the sidebar claims... This place is literally the opposite of what it is supposed to be. AI is

¹¹ Originally bolded by Reddit user #98

scary, and the threats are real, but it is also extremely exciting and incredible work, and I wish we could have a place to discuss it like that¹² (Reddit user #100).

The ‘sidebar claims’ refer to a specific section within the subreddit r/futurology, where a statement outlining the community’s purpose is prominently displayed (Bond et al., 2023). Reddit users are encouraged to join subreddits—specific communities based on mutual interests—that align with their passion. As a network of communities focused on fostering relevant and respectful discussions, Reddit often emphasises the accuracy of shared information on the subreddit. These exchanges highlight how users navigate the complexities of media narratives, often encountering discrepancies between the stated goals of platforms like r/futurology and the actual discussions that occur. Such mismatches can significantly affect the emotional responses of community members, influencing how they perceive and interact with AI narratives.

4.1.2. AI narratives in the overloaded information landscape

The development of digital systems of codification greatly enhances the ability to process and distribute information efficiently. By converting complex data into standardised codes and symbols, these systems facilitate the rapid management, storage, and transmission of data across various digital platforms. Such efficiency also risks information overload, as Marques and Batista (2017) highlight, where the sheer volume of data surpasses an individual’s capacity to process it effectively. This flood of information can lead to feelings of being overwhelmed, affecting how users interact with and perceive digital content.

This sense of being overwhelmed is echoed by several study participants, who report daily encounters with numerous AI narratives across diverse communication channels. Such overload can inhibit effective engagement with content, leading to stress, distractions, and errors that diminish the ability to utilise information meaningfully, as Klapp (1986) discusses. For example, Interviewee #1 describes his experience with the rapid increase of AI narratives:

¹² Direct quote from <https://www.reddit.com/r/Futurology/>: ‘Future(s) Studies, a subreddit devoted to the field of Future(s) Studies and evidence-based speculation about the development of humanity, technology, and civilisation.’

Back at the start of the boom [AI advancements], I was proactively trying to read up stuff. But suddenly, it [the AI hype] started to peak. I was really *overwhelmed*, and I sort of gave up on it, which I should have since I had no time. (Interviewee #1, 40, my italic)

Information overload occurs when audiences feel overwhelmed by the volume of information and selectively disengage to manage their cognitive load (Lee and Carpini, 2010). Toff, Palmer, and Nielsen (2024) suggest focusing on how news perceptions and content deter engagement. Interviewee #2 mentions, 'It is too much information... it is hard to handle so much data daily and understand everything... the data is always new, updating every second. So you cannot really perceive what is happening.' This underscores the challenge of staying informed amid continuous information flow. Interviewee #4 expresses confusion due to conflicting viewpoints on social media: 'When the AI trend appeared, I now have like thousands of opinions shown to me... I am really confused about which one is the honest truth and which one they want to feed me.' This highlights the difficulty in discerning credible information among diverse perspectives.

These experiences illustrate the overwhelming shift from traditional media's single narratives to a multitude of perspectives in modern media, which can lead to confusion and reduced motivation to engage with content, particularly about AI. This disengagement serves as a protective mechanism to preserve cognitive resources, providing insight into how information overload affects user interactions with AI narratives and influences their perceptions of technological advancements.

As Figueiredo and Lopes (2017) outlined, when audiences absorb new information, they initially assess its relevance to their situation. Audience engagement with AI narratives goes beyond simple rational assessments and includes complex emotional and affective responses. Dahlgren and Hill (2020) highlight this interplay, stating, 'Media engagement can never be seen as an exclusively rational/cognitive phenomenon nor can it be reduced to merely the emotional' (2022, p. 14). This suggests that audience reactions to AI narratives encompass a spectrum of emotions from excitement to anxiety, significantly influencing how they process and internalise information.

Therefore, my interest in emotions is rooted in understanding how they influence the engagement with AI narratives. Emotions shape the narratives people are drawn to, the

content they avoid, and their overall engagement with the topic. Acknowledging this helps explain the complex motivations behind audience behaviours and offers a richer, more nuanced picture of media engagement in the digital age.

4.2. Understanding AI narratives

4.2.1. A journey back in history

In interviews conducted for this research, participants often referenced historical events like the industrial revolutions and the digitalisation of the 2010s, which reshaped the employment landscape by phasing out certain jobs while creating new opportunities. This historical context led some to view AI not as a threat but as a potential enhancer of life efficiency and a harbinger of new opportunities, fostering optimism rather than fear for job security. The attitudes towards AI's impact on employment varied widely. For instance, Interviewee #5 expressed cautious optimism by placing AI within historical patterns of technological change:

I am not saying jobs created by AI are going to become proportional to the lost jobs; that remains to be seen. From a historical point of view, every time we had an industrial revolution, it always ended up like that. In the best-case scenario, it does end up that good, and society becomes more prosperous because the result and means of an increase may even enable us to live better lives and work less. (Interviewee #5, 35)

Interviewee #10 shared a mix of anxiety and excitement about being part of the AI shift: 'This is the next big shift with AI. It is super cool to be involved in this transformation, unlike during the IT bubble of the 2000s when I wasn't working yet' (Interviewee #10, 38).

Interviewee #8, acknowledged potential job displacement but viewed it as a chance for societal and personal growth:

Some jobs will disappear, including mine. This is inevitable as AI improves, but it also means society will evolve. If your job goes away, it might be an opportunity to upskill or switch careers. It is more of an opportunity than a risk. (Interviewee #8, 42)

These varied responses—from optimism to nuanced anxiety—illustrate the complex spectrum of public sentiment towards AI and employment. This diversity emphasises the need to incorporate a broad range of experiences and expectations when studying AI's

societal impact, highlighting the evolving nature of career advancement and societal adaptation in the age of technological change.

A crucial aspect to consider is the amount of experience the study participants have accumulated over the years in their field. The longer someone has worked in their domain, the more their knowledge base expands (Salthouse, 2012), and they also develop a heightened sensitivity to emotional cues (Charles and Carstensen, 2010). This study found that tech-savvy professionals with greater industry seniority often viewed AI's impact on jobs more optimistically than their younger counterparts. For instance, a younger interviewee expressed concerns about the emerging AI-dominated landscape:

I think what pisses me off the most is that I am still young. If I were 60, go ahead. Because at that point, it will not affect me that much. But this is the start of my adult life, and this is the world I will have to live in, and I have nothing to say about that. (Interviewee #6, 27)

When asked to elaborate further on what exactly he meant about 'the world I have to live in', he answered:

It is a world where we allow robots like ChatGPT to set a new standard for productivity instead of controlling how much it can involve in our lives. Do you know the series *Back To The Future*¹³? I do not think the world in that series is just an imagination anymore (Interviewee #6, 27).

In contrast, those with more experience, such as a 42-year-old software engineer, tend to approach sensational media narratives with skepticism, reflecting on how media often amplifies fears about technology: '20 years of experience, that allows me to understand that if I see something that is coming, maybe prepare for it and understand it better so that you can tackle it' (Interviewee #8, 42).

These insights show that personal experience not only informs how professionals react to technological changes but also equips them with a framework to critically evaluate media portrayals. This dynamic suggests that without direct personal experience, individuals may

¹³ 'Back to the Future: The Trilogy' refers to a series of three iconic science fiction films directed by Robert Zemeckis and produced by Steven Spielberg. These films explore themes of time travel, the effects of changing the past, and the dynamics of friendship and family across different eras.

rely more heavily on media, potentially leading to a homogenised view shaped by prevailing narratives.

Media literacy equips audiences with critical thinking skills to assess information, recognise biases, and understand media influence on perceptions and behaviors. It is crucial for navigating societal transformations brought by technologies like AI (Potter, 2010; Mihailidis, 2014), though it also presents challenges such as overcoming cognitive barriers and uncertainty about AI's impacts. Perspectives on AI's societal role vary. For instance, Interviewee #11, a software engineer, views AI optimistically as a transformative force similar to past technological advancements:

I do believe that it is more of a helpful tool than a threat in a way. You can take any technological discovery that was made a long time ago, for example, the invention of cars. Or before, people were traveling by horses, then cars were developed, and all of a sudden you got a new quality of life type of improvement. Or when electricity was invented, it was a big deal compared to coal burning. And then perhaps some people went out of jobs, but then new jobs are created as well. (Interviewee #11, 37)

This reflects Rogers' concept of relative advantage, where perceived benefits encourage acceptance of new technologies. Conversely, Interviewee #5 advocates for cautious implementation:

It (AI development) should be regulated in a way that is to support artists for instance... we need to regulate both on an ethical level at some point, and an industry-specific level to make sure that it will not become more destructive than productive. (Interviewee #5, 35)

These perspectives highlight the complexity and challenges in visualizing AI's long-term impacts, potentially slowing its integration into society without observable benefits. This calls for regulatory measures to ensure AI's development is beneficial.

Experience and historical context influence these views. Seasoned professionals often compare AI's emergence to historical innovations like electricity, seeing it as another evolution in technology that could reshape the job market but also create opportunities. This

historical perspective, combined with professional experience, helps mitigate fears of job displacement, shaping a more nuanced understanding of AI's potential impacts.

4.2.2. Beyond reception: an active engagement

In discussing AI narrative consumption, it is evident that audience engagement is not only proactive and discerning but also deeply integrated socially, reflecting a participatory role in interacting with technology and AI content. For example, interviewee #4 explains his strategic use of media algorithms to customise his information feed:

I primarily use Twitter because I can tailor my feed by following specific people, so it constantly shows me business-related AI content. That's actually how I first came across ChatGPT. (Interviewee #4, 32)

This active management of digital environments showcases an approach leveraging algorithmic curation to meet specific informational needs, as highlighted by Gillespie (2014). This method demonstrates a practical engagement with digital content, where users actively adjust their settings to ensure the information they receive is timely and relevant, crucial for professionals needing to stay informed in competitive fields.

Audiences and users are not merely passive recipients of information; they actively engage with and discuss AI imaginaries within their social networks, incorporating these stories into their existing knowledge and experiences. The shift from one-way mass communication to interactive communication, enabled by the Internet (Livingston, 2004), places interpretation at the core of media use, transforming audience roles. This interactive approach allows audiences to assimilate AI narratives, share insights, and engage in debates within their networks, effectively transforming individual interpretations into collective imaginaries. This participatory engagement redefines them from mere recipients to active contributors, influencing the broader AI imaginaries. For instance, Interviewee #12 mentions, 'I discuss the topic (AI and job displacement) with quite a few people in my close network of both family and friends. Also, industry colleagues that are interested in it. So I talk quite a lot about future opportunities and new technology trends with them.' These discussions, often shared informally and infused with personal opinions, reflect a 'word-of-mouth' (Interviewee #7) narrative style that deeply involves tech-savvy users in influencing and disseminating AI's perceived impact.

Several tech-savvy audiences in this study initially described their engagement with AI narratives as more passive than active; they were not actively seeking these stories but routinely found themselves informed by content from subscribed channels—social media, online forums, websites, or newsletters focused on technological updates. This perceived passivity masks the active choices made earlier, such as selecting which channels to follow. These platforms, driven by algorithms, significantly shape the content that audiences encounter, subtly influencing their engagement without their immediate realisation. For instance, interviewee #7 noted:

I stumble across them (AI narratives) on my feed *naturally*...I feel like they are being handed to me quite naturally. So, even though I am not actively searching more about them, I feel quite up to date. (Interviewee #7, 33, my italic)

This comment underscores how seamlessly AI narratives are integrated into daily media consumption, facilitated by complex algorithmic processes that curate content based on user interactions and preferences. This illusion of naturalness, where content appears unobtrusively and feels organic, belies a highly constructed reality governed by algorithms. This disparity raises critical insights into the psychology of media consumption, highlighting how audiences might underestimate the extent to which platforms shape their media environments.

Exploring this dynamic reveals the affecting capacities of algorithms, which can mask significant curation under the guise of freedom of choice, potentially influencing user decisions and opinions subtly. Such insights call for a deeper examination of how this underestimation of algorithmic influence affects user engagement and personal agency, pointing to the need for more transparent media practises that empower users to recognise and counteract unnoticed influences.

Several participants recounted how their fascination with AI began casually on platforms like Reddit and deepened through sources like TechCrunch, further refined by their Google News¹⁴ feed. These interactions, while seemingly passive, are significantly shaped by an

¹⁴ Google News is a news aggregator service developed by Google. It uses algorithms to personalise news feeds based on user interests, browsing history, and location, and it categorises news into various sections like World, Local, Business, Technology, Entertainment, Sports, Science, and Health. <https://news.google.com/>

algorithmic media network that adapts to and reflects users' past behaviours, making AI imaginaries exposure appear natural but actually being a product of their prior engagements like subscribing or liking topics.

This active exploration, driven by curiosity and a need for validation, goes beyond mere consumption. Audiences seek out additional information to deepen their understanding. Dahlgren and Hill's (2020) framework for media engagement motivations reveals a range from seeking entertainment to acquiring knowledge or supporting social causes. Specifically, a significant motivator for tech-savvy users is the pragmatic concern about how AI will impact their careers and future job opportunities. This concern extends to broader societal effects, as users contemplate both personal and collective implications of AI on employment. This dual focus reflects an intersection of curiosity and a proactive stance toward technological disruptions.

Audiences engage with AI narratives out of a deep-seated interest in understanding the technological advancements and the future of work, eager to discern both the opportunities and challenges AI may present. This engagement reflects a complex interplay of personal interests and societal considerations, showcasing how motivations for interacting with AI narratives are layered and driven by a blend of curiosity, practical concerns, and a broader desire to understand how these technologies will shape societal norms and personal prospects. By applying this nuanced view of engagement motivations, we can better appreciate the proactive and reflective nature of audience interactions with AI imaginaries.

As Blackman (2018) highlights, the rise of social media has transformed traditional audiences into *prosumers* or *producers* (2018, p. 221), actively creating and contributing to media content.

The rise of social media, for example, has challenged media scholars to rethink one of their long-standing units of analysis, the audience. Audiences are now considered prosumers or even producers (see Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010), creating and contributing to media content and participating in processes that were once considered the province of media producers and institutions. Within these arguments, it is often assumed that media audiences of the past were passive and now they are active, woken from what is often characterised as a hypnotic stupor. (Blackman, 2018, p. 221)

While algorithms enable a shift towards greater audience agency and participation, they also introduce complexities that may limit real autonomy. Algorithms curate and tailor content in ways that can subtly guide user interactions, creating an illusion of choice while potentially directing behaviors. This dynamic raises critical questions about the true extent of audience agency in digital environments. Are users genuinely empowered as creators and contributors, or are they subtly influenced by complex algorithmic systems that dictate what they see and interact with? This tension highlights a potential gap between perceived empowerment and actual manipulation by algorithms, challenging audiences and users to evaluate how much audience engagement is self-directed versus algorithmically induced.

Techfluencers exemplify this nuanced role of prosumers in the digital media landscape—they are not only consumers but also creators, significantly influencing technological narratives. The next section will delve deeper into how techfluencers have emerged as key players, actively influencing and contributing to shape the imaginaries around technological advancements. This exploration will illuminate their dual role as both audiences and influential creators within the evolving digital landscape.

4.3. The AI experts

4.3.1. Techfluencers: a media source of AI narratives

The potential loss of employment triggers a sense of helplessness and lead to a profound personal or identity crisis as individuals struggle with redefining their life stories amidst uncertain transitions. In such scenarios, where one's future abounds with risks and instabilities, individuals frequently turn to recognised experts to seek guidance to navigate these chaotic times. Burkitt (2008) provides a foundational understanding of how individuals in a globalised context manage existential insecurities when personal agency is perceived as diminished, emphasising the role of *social transitions* (Burkitt, 2008, p. 170) in shaping individual and collective identities.

Opinion leaders—techfluencers in the context this thesis—act as intermediaries who filter, interpret, and tailor information, making it more accessible and understandable for their followers. In every community, opinion leaders play a pivotal role by closely monitoring mass media content, then reinterpreting and relaying this information to their peers, often

adding their insights and perspectives (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, 1968). These individuals are not necessarily celebrities or public figures but often everyday people recognised for their expertise in specific fields. They can be a well-informed friend or a family member with specialised skills who influences others' understanding and engagement with various topics. In the context of AI, tech-savvy audiences and users typically access their information through interactions with these opinion leaders rather than directly from mass media sources. As interviewee #12 highlighted:

I do not need to follow the news and press releases from OpenAI¹⁵, MidJourney¹⁶, or any other because these people (techfluencers) have already taken everything and summarised it for me on LinkedIn. (Interviewee #12, 38)

Integrating this with Burkitt's exploration of how individuals navigate social transitions in a globalised context provides a richer framework. Burkitt emphasises the diminished personal agency in contemporary society, where individuals often feel overwhelmed by the complexities of modern life. In such a landscape, the role of opinion leaders becomes crucial as they help individuals navigate through the uncertainties by providing distilled and understandable information, thereby reinforcing or reshaping their social identities. Building on Burkitt's insights about the diminished personal agency in contemporary society, it becomes clear that the role of opinion leaders is crucial in the realm of technological advancements, where they help individuals navigate through the rapid evolution and complexity of information, thereby reinforcing or contributing to reshaping their social identities. They essentially help construct the social selves of their followers by influencing how they interpret and integrate technological narratives into their personal and professional lives.

Elements of the practices we engage in with others, including the way they influence us by their actions and words, in-form who we are before we even know it... We can also draw from the voices around us, just like the author of a novel, to put together our own identity with a degree of uniqueness and originality; and in response to those other voices we can begin to

¹⁵ What to know about OpenAI, the company behind ChatGPT. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2023/02/06/what-is-openai-chatgpt/> (Accessed: 05 May 2024).

¹⁶ Midjourney is an example of generative AI that can convert natural language prompts into images. It's only one of many machine learning-based image generators that have emerged recently. From What is Midjourney AI and how does it work? Available at: <https://www.androidauthority.com/what-is-midjourney-3324590/> (Accessed: 05 May 2024).

find our own, one that provides a centre-point in our dialogues with our self and with others. (Burkitt, 2008, p. 189).

Opinion leaders bridge the gap between the mass media's impersonal information delivery and the public's need for tailored, meaningful interpretations (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 2008). This role, essential in the complex and overloaded information landscape described earlier, is especially pivotal when it comes to techfluencers dealing with AI technologies. They clarify complex issues and shape perceptions about the associated risks, acting as contemporary opinion leaders through the two-step flow of communication. Techfluencers not only translate information but also actively engage in shaping narratives, influencing how followers perceive and react to technological changes. This influence is crucial where misunderstanding or misinformation about AI could lead to significant consequences, such as stifling innovation due to exaggerated fears or overlooking ethical considerations due to misplaced trust. Such misunderstandings could skew public policy, investment, and personal attitudes in ways that do not align with the actual impacts or potential of AI, thus underscoring the profound role techfluencers play in steering societal responses to technological advancements.

Media trust and scepticism also extend to AI tools such as ChatGPT and the way audiences interact with techfluencers on platforms like LinkedIn. While these AI tools and tech influencers possess advanced capabilities and offer specialised insights, they do not always inspire unconditional confidence among tech-savvy audiences and users. The trustworthiness of media content, particularly in digital settings, has been a focal point in media studies. Tsfati and Cappella (2003) discuss how generalised scepticism towards the media can influence the public's willingness to accept information as credible. Similarly, Metzger, Flanagin, and Medders (2010) provide frameworks for understanding how individuals assess the credibility of online information, highlighting factors such as source expertise—referring to the qualifications and reputation of the author or publishing entity—and transparency, which involves clear disclosure about the authorship and the editorial process. This emphasises the importance of quality markers that aid in credibility assessment. These markers include design quality, which refers to the professional presentation and layout of the website; writing quality, evident through proper grammar and coherence; citations and references that support claims with verifiable evidence; and recency, ensuring the information

is current. These elements collectively help individuals discern the reliability and authority of digital content, enhancing their ability to engage critically with online information.

Interviewee #8 underscores this cautious approach: ‘I do not (trust it). Just like all information on the internet, there is no difference. I take it with a grain of salt... I double-check everything.’ This scrutiny is echoed by interviewee #4 who critically views the outputs of AI models: ‘ChatGPT is just a language model... it gives you wrong information with full confidence and people are very easily convinced that whatever it gives them is right.’ (Interviewee #4, 32)

These perspectives highlight a discerning engagement with AI narratives, illustrating that while audiences and users may follow certain techfluencers, they critically evaluate these interactions, treating the insights from these tech influencers as just another media source. This nuanced scepticism implies that even when audiences follow thought leaders, the techfluencers, they remain vigilant and critically assess the credibility of the information, recognising the potential biases and inaccuracies that can permeate any media source, regardless of its origin. The influence of these techfluencers is significant; they become proprietors of their own media, crafting close connections with their followers and significantly contributing to shape their perceptions of AI and its potential impact on society. For instance, interviewee #9 described how a specific newsletter influenced their view:

Certainly, this Gary Marcus newsletter that I follow has influenced my wariness of AI developments which may reduce job availability for humans. (Interviewee #9, 36)

A key aspect to explore is how tech-savvy audiences ascribe credibility to the AI media narratives these techfluencers share. Terms like ‘in-depth conversation’ and ‘insightful’ were mentioned by participants to characterise the content provided by these influencers. For instance, interviewee #11 shares an influential newsletter consisting of discussions with professionals from well-known businesses as follows:

Lenny Rachitsky¹⁷ has built this massive newsletter¹⁸ inviting folks working at well-known companies. There, you learn about their use of AI and then get to hear it firsthand. What is their experience, and what pitfalls have they discovered, etc.? In one of the episodes, he invited Mark Zuckerberg. It is always insightful to hear about it from industry experts. (Interviewee #11, 37)

Similarly, another audience expresses a deep admiration for another techfluencer who educates and influences through personal engagement: ‘There is one person that I am fascinated with...He is an Iranian, and I really like him. He is my idol, and I enjoy how he speaks, behaves, and educates people. He has also been in the European parliament and educated them on AI.’ This techfluencer’s combination of personal and professional identity, along with his active involvement in significant platforms like LinkedIn, greatly resonates with the audience above, fostering a sense of relevance and connection.

Social context and personal connections deeply influence how media narratives are received and integrated, highlighting the role of interpersonal relationships and networks.

Techfluencers, specialists in niche areas, engage a tech-savvy audience comprising tech professionals, bloggers, and aspiring thought leaders. As detailed by Marwick (2013) and Freberg et al. (2011), these influencers craft their personas and credibility through strategic engagement, which gradually shapes societal norms and expectations. This transformation underscores the concept of social imaginaries: ‘It often happens that what starts off as theories held by a few people come to infiltrate the social imaginary, first of elites, perhaps, and then of the whole society’ (2003, p. 24).

The modern media landscape fosters close relationships between people and public figures, enhancing emotional connections. Techfluencers on platforms like LinkedIn effectively build, nurture, and maintain these connections, significantly impacting their followers’ views and professional landscapes. The expanded range of voices that now populate our thoughts, from direct connections to virtual influencers, each contributing diverse, sometimes conflicting perspectives that enrich personal and professional realms.

¹⁷ Lenny Rachitsky writes newsletters, host a podcast, run a job board, and does angel invest <https://www.lennyrachitsky.com/>

¹⁸ Lenny’s Newsletter is a weekly advice column about building product, driving growth, and accelerating your career. Website: <https://www.lennysnewsletter.com/>

Goffman's concept of impression management (1959) is pertinent here, illustrating how individuals on platforms like LinkedIn perform roles to shape public perception, a strategy crucial for career advancement. Techfluencers master this art, crafting public personas that project their desired image and authority, influencing perceptions and enhancing their industry influence through strategic content and engagement. This blending of personal branding with professional expertise exemplifies how techfluencers navigate and dominate the modern digital and professional landscape.

Techfluencers, despite their expertise, can contribute to the problem of AI information overload. Figueiredo and Lopes (2017) discuss how the democratisation of content creation and distribution enables widespread dissemination with minimal oversight, potentially exacerbating information overload. Audiences face a barrage of AI narratives, making it crucial to critically assess the credibility of the information techfluencers distribute, akin to evaluating any media source. While the in-depth knowledge of techfluencers can overwhelm and deter less informed followers, incorporating diverse perspectives can make discussions more inclusive and comprehensible. Contributions from non-experts, for instance, help demystify AI, broadening the conversation and making it more accessible.

In today's digital media landscape, where expertise and influence often overlap, it falls on the audience to distinguish between informative content and promotional material. The role of techfluencers as both information providers and personal brand promoters adds complexity, requiring audiences to discern the authenticity and reliability of presented narratives. This scenario highlights the broader digital media challenge of navigating information overload and identifying trustworthy sources. This necessitates advanced media literacy skills, empowering users to critically evaluate and make informed decisions about the AI and technology narratives they encounter, especially those propagated by techfluencers.

4.3.2. We will have AI experts, but we are no expert yet

A key observation from the interview participants who are deeply concerned with AI's perceived impact on employment, is their noticeable absence from discussing this topic online. Despite expressing strong sentiments and passion about AI technologies and their effects on the job market, these tech-savvy audiences remain silent observers in online

debates. This observation led to the identification of what I term *the humble AI audience*—a group that is passionate yet reserved, warranting further exploration.

This behaviour aligns with Eveland's cognitive mediation model, which suggests that the way audiences and users process information can influence their willingness to engage in public discussions (Eveland, 2001). Tech-savvy audiences expressed a lack of confidence in their depth of knowledge, which they felt was insufficient for contributing meaningfully to the debates. This sentiment not only reflects humility but also a cautious approach to participating in conversations where misinformation could easily proliferate. Tech-savvy audiences and users become responsible in engaging with, interpreting, and potentially sharing information within the digital landscape with a mindful and discerning attitude.

Interviewee #12 encapsulated this mindset, elaborating further:

I think it is more of imposter syndrome. Like, 'Who am I to have an opinion?' or, no one really has the right answer...I just feel like there are other people who know so much. Why should I be posting? What can I contribute? And I know for a fact that they probably do not know that much more than I do as well. (Interviewee #12, 38)

This perspective underscores the responsible AI audience's approach: they are aware of their knowledge limits and the evolving nature of AI, which leads them to participate cautiously and thoughtfully in discussions. Echoing Noelle-Neumann's spiral of silence theory, this reluctance to assert views, whether due to feelings of insignificance or a lack of expertise, underscores the dynamics within digital media environments where the humble audience remains quiet, and the responsible audience opts for silence as a thoughtful action to prevent the spread of misinformation and maintain the discussion's integrity (Noelle-Neumann, 1974).

Reflecting on the discussion about techfluencers, media trust, and media literacy, it is clear that audiences critically evaluate the trustworthiness of AI narratives shared by perceived experts, often subconsciously adopting a reserved stance. Interviewee #2 encapsulates this when they say, 'I am still one of many people interested in AI, but I do not really work with it right now. So that is why I do not think I am that important to share my opinions with Internet strangers in general' (Interviewee #2, 27). This statement highlights how subtle intellectual

rivalries and the complex dynamics of knowledge and influence shape media trust within digital environments. On platforms like r/futurology, intellectual rivalries often lead to debates that can overshadow nuanced discussions with dominant viewpoints. Such environments, while enriching for critical analysis, may intimidate less confident individuals from contributing, reinforcing barriers to inclusive dialogue. Understanding and mitigating these rivalries can democratise discussions on AI, enhancing both the depth and accessibility of these conversations.

The rapid evolution of AI demands continuous learning across all skill levels. Innovations frequently alter the landscape, making lifelong learning a necessity in a field where certain answers are elusive and the context constantly shifts. This ongoing change not only fuels a commitment to education but also brings emotional challenges, such as uncertainty and the stress of remaining updated. In this relentless progression, everyone becomes a perpetual learner, but the flood of information often leads to overload and tension, as noted by Interviewee #5:

‘I have not had official training, mostly because I think the current trainers do not yet fully grasp it. But that will change. We will have experts using it and being able to teach it. Right now, it is so deep in its infant phase that everyone can try to find its parents. We are still at a stage where it feels like everyone is trying to figure out who the experts are. Check the sources and make sure that what has been produced is factually correct.’ (Interviewee #5, 35).

The metaphor of infancy and parenthood captures the nascent yet rapidly maturing nature of AI, emphasising the collective journey of discovery and mastery in which even experts must continuously verify and validate their knowledge. The statement serves as a comprehensive insight from the audience, concluding this aspect of the complex relationship between media audiences, the perceived experts, and the non-experts. It also underscores the necessity of critical engagement with information, a skill increasingly vital in a landscape prone to overload and misinformation.

4.4. Understanding AI narratives: an interplay of social imaginaries and emotional responses

Audiences’ emotional responses to AI narratives might be powerful and varied, often reflecting deep concerns about technology’s impact on employment. For example, a Reddit

user expressed resistance to automation by stating, ‘I feel like an old woman yelling at the clouds, but I pretty much always ask for/demand a human agent. I work in tech, so it is not a lack of know-how; it is about keeping some jobs for folks.’ This highlights the emotional resistance toward technological advances and the desire to preserve human roles.

To address the third research question: ‘How do media imaginaries contribute to shaping the engagement of tech-savvy audiences and users with AI narratives?’, the study continues diving deep into the aspect of tech-savvy user engagement. A notable headline from Fast Company in late February 2024, ‘Klarna says its AI assistant does the work of 700 people after it laid off 700 people’¹⁶ spurred vigorous debates across tech forums. On r/futurology, the discussion focused primarily on two aspects: the accuracy of the headline statement and the scepticism regarding AI’s efficiency compared to human competency. One user questions: ‘**They claim**¹⁹ is the key phrase there. Take what a company says at face value when it very obviously benefits them to say it or use slightly more critical thinking and realise it is almost certainly some kind of lie?’. Another pointed out the technology’s nascence: ‘There is no substitution, at least not yet. People think that AI is the end of all, but it is still in its infancy and shouldn’t replace anything right now, just assist’ (Reddit user #104).

The debate extends to the adoption and integration of AI in the workplace. As Chambers (2016) notes, acceptance for *unfamiliar technologies* (2016, p. 24) is influenced not only by its efficacy but also by how it aligns with existing societal values. This alignment is crucial for the broader public’s readiness to integrate new technologies into traditional settings. Taylor (2003) articulates the imaginaries as encompassing ‘the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations’ (2003, p. 23). Reddit discussions reflect these dynamics, as Reddit user #115 speculated on societal adjustments due to AI: ‘In the future, maybe we will need to look at the model of society. Can everyone work fewer hours and then use AI technologies to get the same output? If people can have a better lifestyle because of AI developments, isn’t that a great thing?’. This comment underscores the potential societal benefits of AI, highlighting the complex interplay between technological advances and societal expectations.

¹⁹ bolded originally by Reddit user #98

Concerns about technology advancements are logical, as highlighted by Reddit user #102's cautionary note: 'Increased efficiency combined with rearranging tasks can cut costs... Progress is good, but we need to be careful that we do not destroy the working class.' Thrift (2004) discusses the *technical unconscious* (2004, p. 214), where autonomous technologies operate without human oversight, enhancing human creativity and imagination. This backdrop often amplifies media-driven anxieties about job security and the future of work, illustrating the intricate dynamics between technological progress and societal reactions.

Online discussions, particularly on platforms like Reddit, showcase a spectrum of emotional responses and speculative views on AI's impact on employment. Users debate whether AI will reduce human labour demand or merely alter job roles to supervising technology. The anonymity of these platforms encourages users to express fears, criticisms, or speculative thoughts more freely than in personalised settings like interviews, reflecting a broad range of perspectives on the societal implications of AI advancements.

The way audiences envision a future intertwined with AI is shaped by the narratives presented to them. These narratives not only construct a vision of an AI-centric world but also stimulate specific emotions and feelings, influencing how people react to and engage with the concept. Notably, the interview participants from the same subreddit exhibit a more accepting and positive outlook towards AI's impact on society and job opportunities, suggesting that the context of engagement—anonymous vs. identifiable—may play a crucial role in shaping responses.

Suler (2004) notes that anonymity can lead to more open and critical expression, a common feature on platforms like Reddit where users can opt for real names or pseudonyms, and real or generic profile pictures. This anonymity often results in a tone distinct from structured interviews. Additionally, Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons (2002) highlight how the internet's anonymity enables people to express aspects of themselves that might remain hidden in face-to-face interactions. This phenomenon illustrates how the same individuals might express differently across forums, significantly influenced by the communication mode. Understanding this helps clarify the varied emotional reactions to AI, emphasising how media format and anonymity shape public discussions on technological advancements.

Angerer (2018) views affect and emotion as integral to human existence, neither fully calculable nor ignorable. Burkitt (1997) further elaborates, describing emotions as inherently communicative, reflecting the relational dynamics and interdependencies they inhabit. This understanding is illustrated by users' frustrated interactions with AI, highlighting the communicative role of emotions in the dynamics of power and technology. For example, Reddit user #14 expressed dissatisfaction with bot services: 'The bots are just as bad as automated phone bots, don't help at all and then automatically close the connection. I had to complain on the app's Appstore Page to get a response.' Similarly, Reddit user #1 shared a challenging experience with Klarna's AI: 'It kept misunderstanding my question and was no help. I ended up contacting the store directly, which used a poor translating program, complicating communication further. I'm still unsure if my dispute with Klarna will be resolved. I hate it.'

Reddit, a platform hosting interest-based communities that value respectful and accurate dialogue, often sees its users challenge sensational news by verifying facts, as noted by Bond and Garrett (2023): 'It exemplifies the complex interplay between human decision-making, community norms, user traits, and the technologically mediated environment' (2023, p. 2). This dynamic underlines how community-driven verification processes can uphold the integrity of discussions in digital spaces.

Reddit's structure, characterised by its user-driven content submission and voting system, allows for significant user influence over dialogue quality and information prominence, ideally reflecting community values of accuracy and relevance. This participatory model supports the investigation into how tech audiences and users interpret AI narratives, directly informing our exploration of media imaginaries' influence on audience engagement.

The platform's environment, designed to foster respectful and accurate dialogue, exemplifies the role of digital spaces in upholding discussion integrity, thereby influencing public perception and actions concerning AI's societal impacts. Such a structure allows Reddit to connect with its users on an affective level, as Angerer (2018) suggests: 'a sensitive environment, allowing it to interact with its users on an affective level' (2018, p. 252). This understanding is critical in addressing how media imaginaries contribute to shaping the engagement of tech-savvy audiences with AI narratives and revealing their actions in

response to these narratives, particularly concerning job displacement and technological advancements.

On Reddit, particularly within the r/futurology subreddit, users approach AI narratives with a critical eye, often questioning the accuracy and authenticity of the information presented. This scepticism is evident in comments where users scrutinise promotional content and self-reported metrics from companies, reflecting a high level of media literacy within the community:

I would really doubt how they got to those figures. (Reddit user #103)

Why would you trust their metrics to be valid or for their self-reporting to be an honest appraisal of the pros and cons? This is an advertisement made out of carefully selected results from made-up metrics. I do not take it very seriously. (Reddit user #99)

I am going to trust SvD more than what is marked as 'content from Klarna. Advertisement.' Disguised as an article. (Reddit user #113)

Reddit's structure not only facilitates passive consumption of information but actively encourages users to engage with and evaluate narratives critically. This setup turns users into both consumers and evaluators, crucial for the verification of information through rigorous discussions and debates. Such active participation not only cultivates a discerning community but also enhances media literacy skills that extend beyond the platform. This environment is conducive to developing critical media consumption habits, essential in discussions related to AI where the accuracy of information can profoundly influence public opinion and policy decisions. Tsfaty and Cappella (2003) discuss how media scepticism influences engagement, and on Reddit, this scepticism translates into proactive fact-checking and debate, enhancing the platform's collective intelligence and the users' ability to navigate complex media landscapes effectively.

On Reddit, tech-savvy users approach AI imaginaries with mixed sentiments. Some, familiar with discussions on AI advancements, express a level of acceptance and are not surprised by new developments, viewing AI as a means to enhance quality of life by optimising resources

and making previously unaffordable technologies accessible, as one user described life becoming ‘even more empowered and productive’ (Reddit user #36).

Conversely, a more prevalent sentiment across the Reddit platform is a collection of negative emotions—frustration, anger, worry, sarcasm, and criticism—especially directed towards narratives like those presented by companies such as Klarna. These discussions often escalate to strong language and dire predictions about a future where AI replaces human labour in ‘every imaginable industry’ (Reddit user #19), echoing a deep-seated fear of widespread job displacement and economic upheaval. Reddit users often express a critical view, forecasting severe societal shifts, as illustrated by the following comment:

AI isn't that big of a deal, it won't render that many jobs replaceable...our current economic system cannot survive the AI boom...If we don't evolve, adjust or adapt our economic system to the AI boom, around 7 out of 10 people you know will be out of work, with all that money saved going to the billionaire owners, not any of the replaced workers. (Reddit user #22)

Such discussions highlight a community actively engaging with AI narratives to share perspectives, assert opinions, and predict societal shifts. This interaction enriches the understanding of how tech-savvy audiences anticipate and react to the perceived negative imaginaries of AI on employment, echoing sentiments found in interviews and adding depth to the study of societal responses to AI technologies.

This present research argues that social imaginaries about AI are not merely speculative but significantly shape actual expectations and anxieties regarding AI's future integration into daily life. These imaginaries, while laden with ideological biases and misconceptions, powerfully influence societal perceptions and the integration of technology. Interviews reveal that whether narratives are overly optimistic or pessimistic, they contribute to a deeper understanding of public sentiment towards AI.

Modern social imaginaries, actively experienced by various communities, are more than idealistic notions—they are embedded in ideology and essential for enabling meaningful practises. While these imaginaries may contain biases and distortions, they are an integral part of our reality, emphasising the importance of critical engagement with these narratives to uncover the underlying fears and hopes that steer public discussions around AI.

Insights from the r/futurology subreddit, enriched by testimonies from Reddit users and interviews with tech-savvy individuals, highlight a landscape of nuanced engagement. Emotional responses, whether driven by apprehension about AI's impact on jobs or optimism about its potential to enhance life, underscore the deep personal and societal stakes involved in AI imaginaries. These emotional expressions reveal how social imaginaries shape dialogue, perceptions, and responses to AI within the community.

4.5. Responses to an imagined future of work with AI: to what extent do we want to prepare for it?

The final research question explores the actions of tech-savvy audiences and users in response to AI narratives and what these actions reveal about their relationship with media imaginaries and their understanding of these narratives. This inquiry delves into how audiences perceive 'the next big shift with AI' (Interviewee #9) as either beneficial or detrimental, reflecting their interpretations of media narratives.

Reddit user #20 offers a perspective that combines confidence with caution, speculating about the future impact of AI:

We are still maybe 4-8 years away from the 'big switch over.' If we do not change our economic system to evolve, adjust or adapt to the AI boom, basically around 7 out of 10 people you know will be out of work, and all that money saved will be going to the billionaire owners, not any of the replaced workers. (Reddit user #20)

This viewpoint starkly contrasts with the more cautious tones of tech-savvy interviewees like #9, who express both excitement and anxiety about AI advancements:

...this next big shift with AI, that is super cool. But then there is also anxiety... am I on the train, or am I on the platform waving to the people who are going to take over from us? (Interviewee #9, 38)

The difference in expression between Reddit users and interview participants suggests varying levels of engagement with the topic. Reddit allows for bold, anonymous statements with little personal accountability, while interview responses are often more reflective and personally connected, showing a deeper contemplation of AI's potential changes. This

disparity highlights the influence of platform dynamics on user engagement and narrative interpretation.

The media imaginaries discussed in the analysis involve a complex negotiation of meaning among technology, culture, and society, particularly concerning AI's role. Public discussions, such as those on the subreddit r/futurology, often center around AI's potential to reshape employment, reflecting broader societal implications. For instance, skepticism about AI's immediate capabilities is evident in comments like, 'It is going to be a while before AI is going to be able to do the things they are claiming (that they can do)' (Reddit user #48) This scepticism is part of a larger conversation about the realistic impacts of AI on society. Audiences respond to AI narratives by adopting various strategies to adapt and stay informed, ranging from formal education to self-directed learning. For example, Interviewee #3 discussed proactive educational choices:

I took a course on AI implementation in hardware during my master's degree, and also an elective during my bachelor's. Additionally, I have attended webinars and taken online courses on LinkedIn to deepen my understanding of AI, anticipating its growing relevance. (Interviewee #3, 28)

However, not all responses involve active engagement. Interviewee #1 expressed a withdrawal from continual updates due to time constraints: 'I sort of gave up on staying updated with AI, as I just don't have the time anymore' (Interviewee #1, 41). These individual strategies are complemented by changes in information consumption habits. Interviewee #4, for instance, sought out targeted newsletters to keep abreast of AI developments: 'I started looking for newsletters with reliable AI information and signed up for digital copies' (Interviewee #4, 32). This transformation in learning and consumption habits often leads to significant personal and professional decisions. Interviewee #8 shared a reflection on the impact of AI on their career:

I am looking at changing industries now, and changing jobs as well... People are losing their jobs left and right. It is shitty for everyone right now, but certainly, the market is changing and, in large part, to machine translation. And I am just not interested in doing the job as it will look obsolete in another year. (Interviewee #8, 36)

These narratives about AI not only inform but also significantly influence personal and professional life choices, illustrating a dynamic engagement with technology that spans educational efforts to career transitions. The diverse responses—ranging from enhancing knowledge to reconsidering career paths—highlight a proactive approach to navigating the challenges and opportunities presented by AI.

The discussions among audiences and r/futurology Reddit users frequently revolve around strategies for adapting to an imagined future intertwined with AI. These conversations reflect a spectrum of viewpoints on AI's potential to either enhance human opportunities or pose significant risks. For example:

Interviewee #1 questions the broader societal impacts:

Will AI development create more opportunities for people in the future, or will it be a threat to our livelihoods? We need to adapt our society and the way we work to cope with these changes. (Interviewee #1, 41)

Interviewee #3 offers a balanced perspective:

AI is useful, and as humans, we need to harness it wisely to support us. If our jobs are threatened, we should enhance our capabilities or find niches that suit human skills, like big-picture thinking, while using AI for detailed tasks. (Interviewee #3, 28)

A Reddit user suggests practical short-term strategies:

It is too early to be fired with no social safety nets like UBI²⁰ in place. For now, trades that AI can not replace, like plumbing or roofing, are safer career choices. (Reddit user #53)

These discussions envision a world where AI redefines traditional roles and potentially improves the quality of life, prompting shifts in societal dynamics. The conversations highlight an understanding of the complexities and conflicts that accompany significant technological advancements, reminiscent of past shifts like the industrial and digital revolutions.

²⁰ Universal basic income (UBI) is the concept of a government program in which every adult citizen receives a set amount of money regularly. The goals of a basic income system are to alleviate poverty and replace other need-based social programs that potentially require greater bureaucratic involvement. Read more at: <https://basicincome.stanford.edu/about/what-is-ubi/>

Audiences and users engage with AI narratives for diverse reasons, ranging from economic survival to ethical concerns about technology's role in society. For instance, Interviewee #10 expresses anxiety about keeping pace with AI advancements:

I am really anxious about not having AI skills. Last year, I immersed myself in AI podcasts and YouTube tutorials, trying to keep up. I have been using ChatGPT, but everything evolves so fast, I am not sure if I can keep up. (Interviewee #10, 38)

Interviewee #3 notes that his job demands staying updated on AI: 'Due to my job, I have had to learn about AI. Now I'm more involved because my work requires it' (Interviewee #3, 28). Others, like Interviewees #2 and #5, actively pursue education to prepare for a future intertwined with AI:

I am taking a course in my free time to learn more about AI, aiming to feel *more secure* in the AI-driven job market. (Interview #2, 27, my italic).

I see a future need to work effectively with AI models, but I haven't yet had the chance to pursue formal training. (Interviewee #5, 35).

Additionally, Reddit user #47 shared their thoughts on future economic challenges:

In 10-15 years, without massive reform, the current economic model for employment begins to fall apart in developed societies. The ones who stand to benefit from this are also the one with the power to force this reform or ensure this is approached in a humanist way. (Reddit user #47)

Reflecting on broader imagined societal changes, Reddit user #47 anticipates economic upheavals: 'In the next 10-15 years, if we do not reform our economic systems, the job market will collapse, benefiting only a few at the top unless we adopt more humanistic approaches.' (Reddit user #47)

These narratives illustrate that responses to AI are informed by personal experiences, societal expectations, and anticipations of future technological impacts. This diversity underscores how AI narratives critically influence personal decision-making and societal dynamics, highlighting the need for individuals to adapt their skills for future AI-related challenges.

The motivation to engage with AI extends beyond professional needs to fears of falling behind in technological trends. Interviewee #2 articulates this concern: ‘I do not think there is a catastrophe yet, but I fear that can happen’. Interviewee #4 raises concerns about increasing global inequality due to the uneven distribution of AI technology: ‘The inequality will just keep increasing because the technological ecosystems in the West and the East are so different.’ This comment points to fears that AI advancements could disproportionately benefit technologically advanced regions, enhancing their economic and technological dominance, while less developed areas might lag, deepening global socio-economic divides. This calls for international efforts to ensure equitable access to AI technologies.

Interviewee #6 reflects on AI’s broader societal implications: ‘It is a positive change, but it will impact the working class’. This perspective shows concern for how AI might affect those not directly involved in AI-driven fields but whose jobs could be affected by technological shifts. Moreover, Interviewee #8, a commercial translator, notes the direct impact of AI on their field: ‘Machine translations are pushing down prices (of hiring professional translators) across the board.’

These discussions reveal that motivations behind audience actions in response to AI narratives are complex, reflecting nuanced perceptions of AI’s impact on employment. Individuals interpret these changes within their personal and social contexts, suggesting a deeper engagement with AI narratives than previously acknowledged. This highlights the importance of proactive policy-making and educational initiatives that consider the diverse ways people engage with and interpret AI’s effects on the job market.

This engagement, shaped by personal, professional, and societal influences, illustrates a journey through a world reimagined by AI narratives, especially concerning employment changes. Actions driven by these narratives blend self-preservation, ethical considerations, and a readiness to harness AI’s transformative potential, emphasising the creation of a shared imagined space where the future of work and societal roles are continually re-envisioned in the wake of AI advancements.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

5.1. Answering the research questions

In this thesis, the emotional and cognitive engagement with the audiences and users towards these AI narratives were examined under the theories of imaginaries to understand the thinking process and motivations behind the actions taken after making sense of the narratives. These imaginaries play a role in influencing broader societal engagement and attitudes towards technological advancement and job displacement. They hold the power of shaping societal expectations and fears. The media imaginaries serve as pivotal frameworks for interpreting how communities and individuals internalise and respond to the swift advancements in AI innovations. These imaginaries are reflective and active agents in shaping how societies and their constituents formulate changes brought about by technological progress, particularly in employment. By understanding these shared visions, this research reveals how collective beliefs and media portrayals influence the public's emotional and cognitive engagement with AI technologies. The analysis underscores that media imaginaries are not passive backdrops but dynamic forces that mould public understanding and reaction to technological disruptions, guiding the narrative journey of societies as they navigate the complexities of AI integration into daily life and its broader implications on job markets. This approach highlights the integral role of media imaginaries in reflecting and constructing the social fabric, making them a central concept in understanding the interface between technology, media, and societal change.

This thesis examines various aspects of media audience engagement, particularly focusing on how narratives about AI technology and their perceived societal impacts are consumed, interpreted, and understood by Reddit users active in the subreddit r/futurology. It delves into the sources of these narratives, exploring their influence on audience perceptions, notably in the context of perceived impacts on job availability and employability. Ultimately, this research aims to clarify the complex relationships between media audiences, narratives and their sources, and the formation and influence of perceptions and audience engagement following the framework of engagement parameters

The engagement of audiences with AI narratives is influenced by several interrelated factors that shape their perception and interaction with media content. Contextually, individuals' historical knowledge, professional maturity, and digital literacy affect how they interpret and

relate to AI advancements. This *context* sets the stage for how AI narratives are received and understood within their personal and professional environments.

Motivations for engaging with AI narratives often stem from a desire to stay informed amid rapid technological changes. However, the sheer volume and pace of information can lead to overwhelm, making it challenging for audiences to assess the reliability and relevance of the narratives they encounter. This drives a critical need for media literacy to discern the accuracy and intent behind AI discussions.

Modalities of engagement describe how audiences process and react to AI narratives. This includes cognitive engagement, where individuals critically analyse the information; affective responses, where emotional reactions to content occur; and communicative practises, where discussions or sharing happen. These modalities highlight the complexity of media interactions, showing that engagement is not only about consuming information but also about interpreting and reacting to it in varied ways.

Intensity reflects the depth and fervor with which individuals engage with AI narratives. This can range from passive reception of information to active advocacy or opposition based on perceived impacts on employment and societal well-being. The intensity of engagement is crucial as it determines the strength of influence that narratives have on individual and collective actions.

Consequences of engagement encompass the outcomes resulting from interactions with AI narratives. These can include changes in personal understanding or attitudes towards AI, as well as broader shifts in public opinion and societal norms regarding AI and employment. Actions such as fact-checking and cross-verifying information illustrate how concerns about credibility in the digital age lead to more skeptical and proactive behaviors among audiences.

Together, these parameters create a comprehensive framework for analysing how different segments of the audience engage with AI narratives. This framework not only reveals the layered and dynamic nature of media consumption but also underscores the critical role of contextual understanding, motivations, modalities, intensity, and consequences in shaping the social imaginaries around AI and its implications for the future of work.

This study challenges the common perception of tech-savvy audiences as passive consumers of AI narratives. It reveals that these individuals engage dynamically with content, reflecting deeply on how AI influences societal roles and employment prospects. This process of engagement allows them to connect new AI advancements with their existing knowledge and experiences, illustrating the critical reflection necessary to understand AI's societal impacts, particularly concerning job displacement. This answers the first research question by showing that distribution and engagement with AI narratives among tech-savvy audiences and users are far from passive and significantly impact their understanding of AI's role in society. Furthermore, by actively discussing these narratives within their networks, tech-savvy audiences not only interpret AI's implications but also shape these interpretations through social interactions. This engagement frequently goes beyond superficial exchanges and becomes central in forming collective understandings. These findings address the second research question by highlighting how personal interpretations and societal discussions influence actions related to perceived job displacement.

This engagement is often underpinned by algorithm-driven platforms such as social media and news feeds, which tailor content based on users' past interactions and preferences. This contrasts the perceived naturalness of content engagement and the reality of algorithmic customisation, offering insights into the psychology of media consumption. The study illustrates how audiences may underestimate their active role in shaping the media landscape, with algorithmic integration subtly influencing their consumption patterns. This insight into algorithmic mediation addresses the third research question about the contribution of media imaginaries in shaping engagement with AI narratives, underscores the dynamic nature of audience engagement. Driven by conscious choices and subconscious influences, the complex interplay between users and digital media platforms is highlighted.

Herein lies the significant role of techfluencers. Perceived as experts in their fields, the narratives propagated by these thought leaders gain heightened credibility and influence among their audience. A key aspect to explore is how audiences ascribe credibility to the AI media narratives these techfluencers share, enhancing their perceived authority and impact. They become key facilitators, the catalysts in the distribution of AI narratives, wielding their platforms to shape how their followers perceive and emotionally react to AI, thereby influencing real-world decisions—whether pursuing AI-related education, adjusting media consumption habits, or participating in public discussions. Techfluencers are an important

channel for media imaginaries, enhancing, altering, or contesting these narratives through their engagements.

Techfluencers play a crucial role in mediating and amplifying media imaginaries. Their platforms become critical spaces where media imaginaries are either reinforced or contested, impacting how their audiences—viewers, readers, followers—understand and react to narratives about AI’s role in society. However, it is essential to recognise that techfluencers often craft their own narratives by reinterpreting information from various media sources — online news sites, social media platforms, Reddit communities, podcasts (the *Modalities*)—and infusing it with their opinions and insights to bolster their personal branding and online image. This dynamic raises an important question: Are techfluencers truly aiding audiences in their quest to understand AI narratives, or are they merely adding to the clutter in an already saturated information environment? This underscores the need to critically assess the role of techfluencers in giving out AI narratives and their impact on public understanding and perception. Given their influence over tech-savvy audiences and users, a crucial call arises for ethical responsibilities among techfluencers to ensure accuracy, balance, and consideration of the societal impact of the information they spread.

As audiences migrate from traditional media to digital and social media platforms, the authority and influence of techfluencers could be amplified or diluted. Their role in potentially spreading misinformation—whether unintentionally due to a lack of thorough vetting or intentionally for personal or commercial gain—calls for critically examining their practices and their ethical implications. This research also highlights a notable intellectual rivalry and scrutiny towards the trustworthiness of AI narratives circulated by techfluencers, who often shape public perception through their significant online influence. However, there is a risk that their deep dives into complex technical details can overwhelm their audience, suggesting that while techfluencers drive engagement, they may also inadvertently contribute to information overload and confusion.

A key observation from discussions with the tech-savvy audiences was their silence in online debates despite a deep concern about AI’s perceived impact on employment. This led to the identification of what I have termed *the humble AI narrative audience*, individuals who feel they lack sufficient knowledge to contribute meaningfully to discussions or to challenge the information presented by perceived experts.

Reddit has become a stage where concerns, scepticism, and various interpretations about AI's efficiency versus human competencies are fervently exchanged. The narratives absorbed and reiterated by the audience on platforms like Reddit highlight the critical nature of media in shaping perceptions—whether they amplify fears or foster hope about technological integration into daily life and work. Where each narrative consumed and shared can reinforce or alter the collective stance on technological advancement.

Regarding the fourth research question, the actions of tech-savvy audiences and users in response to AI narratives reveal a complex relationship with media imaginaries. Audiences and users navigate a landscape shaped by techfluencers and algorithmic curation, which influences not only their perceptions but also their real-world decisions related to AI and employment. This relationship is intricately tied to their understanding of AI's societal roles, underscoring the significant influence of media imaginaries in shaping public and professional perceptions of AI. Social and media imaginaries are not merely speculative but function as powerful frameworks that embody ideologies and enable certain societal practises. As this research has shown, while these narratives may contain inaccuracies or bias, they play a crucial role in how AI technologies are perceived and debated within the public sphere. These imaginations shape expectations and fears about the future of work and life alongside AI, influencing everything from policy discussions to individual career choices.

The findings from this thesis reveal that these narratives, filled with both optimism and concern, are not only reflections of individual anxieties but are also indicative of broader societal reactions to technological changes. The intensity and variety of engagement on platforms like Reddit, coupled with insights from interviews, illustrate how deeply these imaginaries are ingrained in people's experiences and expectations. This engagement underscores the necessity for a critical approach to media narratives about AI — one that actively questions and unpacks the ideologies and assumptions underpinning discussions.

By critically engaging with these narratives, we can uncover the underlying fears and hopes that guide conversations around AI. This process is vital for developing a more nuanced understanding of how AI is reshaping societal structures and individual lives. It also highlights the importance of media literacy in navigating an increasingly complex information landscape, where the ability to discern between biased narratives and factual information is crucial.

Addressing media literacy, this thesis underscores the critical need for enhanced media literacy to navigate the complex narratives surrounding AI and employment. While media literacy is invaluable, it should not be viewed as a standalone solution but as part of a broader set of societal and policy responses aimed at ensuring balanced and equitable access to technology. This approach is essential for fostering informed public debate and enabling individuals to make nuanced decisions about AI technologies. Such literacy empowers users to critically assess the content and to understand the broader implications of AI narratives, facilitating a more informed and proactive conversation.

In summary, this study not only maps the contours of public sentiment towards AI but also emphasises the role of media and communication in shaping these perceptions.

Understanding these dynamics is essential for policymakers, educators, and technologists as they forge paths forward in an AI-integrated world. This thesis contributes to a nuanced comprehension of how narratives about AI are constructed and consumed and how they function within and possibly transform the social and economic landscapes they depict. This understanding is crucial for anticipating and shaping the trajectories of technological and societal change, ensuring that as we navigate the complexities of AI integration, we do so with a critical and informed perspective that values both human and technological advancement.

5.2. Future research directions and recommendations

Building on these insights, further research could beneficially explore how shifts in media consumption patterns might alter the influence of techfluencers and the evolution of media imaginaries. As we navigate the dynamic landscape of media consumption, the evolving influence of techfluencers and the consequent transformation of media imaginaries call for a deeper, more nuanced investigation. This exploration should particularly focus on how changes in media consumption patterns—spurred by technological advancements and tech-savvy audiences and users behaviour shifts—might significantly reshape the roles and impacts of techfluencers and the development and perception of media imaginaries.

Firstly, a comprehensive analysis of tech-savvy audiences and users' evolving preferences and habits should be conducted, examining how new platforms and technologies redefine how information is consumed and shared. Moreover, the interplay between media

consumption patterns and the credibility of techfluencers needs to be scrutinised. With the increasing scepticism towards traditional media and the rise of fake news, techfluencers who can provide reliable, insightful, and verified information might become pivotal trusted sources.

Additionally, the effect of algorithm-driven content delivery systems on media consumption should be explored. Algorithms tailor content to user preferences, potentially creating echo chambers reinforcing existing beliefs and perspectives. This mechanism can significantly impact the formation and evolution of media imaginaries by limiting the diversity of engaged narratives and, consequently, narrowing the scope of societal and technological debates. Such a narrowing could skew public perception of AI's societal impacts, emphasising certain narratives while obscuring others.

Research should also consider how demographic changes, such as age, education, and cultural background, influence media consumption habits and the engagement with techfluencer content. Understanding these variables can provide insights into how different population segments engage with and are influenced by narratives about AI and its societal implications. This approach will help identify gaps and limitations in media literacy and areas where targeted educational initiatives could effectively enhance public understanding and critical engagement with media content. The findings from this study also suggest that media literacy and a vital approach to consuming AI narratives are essential for navigating the complexities of how AI is reshaping employability. This could provide deeper insights into how narratives are formed and consumed in an increasingly digital landscape, influencing societal and individual responses to technological advancements in AI. Lastly, future investigations should aim to develop frameworks for fostering more inclusive and critically engaged media landscapes that can better accommodate and reflect the diversity of public experiences and expectations regarding AI and automation. By encouraging broader participation in media narrative creation and critique, stakeholders can ensure that media imaginaries more accurately and constructively reflect the potential societal impacts of emerging technologies.

5.3. Final thoughts

In early April 2024, interview #2, a 27-year-old technical assembler for a large company producing autonomous vehicles based in Stockholm, Sweden, sent me a surprising message. He shared that he had been laid off due to his company's new working direction toward a more automated assembly process. This event made the theoretical discussions about AI and automation we had during the interview strikingly real for him. His experiences provide a concrete example of the impact of AI narratives on individual lives, particularly relevant to the themes of this research. During our interview, he expressed a nuanced view on the potential of AI technology to replace jobs like his. He explained:

Automation is definitely taking over tasks we once thought were uniquely ours. Machines can take over monotonous jobs. But this does not mean machines can do everything — there are still tasks they cannot handle. Currently, I do not see this as a threat, but rather an opportunity to redirect human labour to areas where it is much needed, like in underdeveloped regions of Africa or South America. We should not aim for a peak in technology only to fear a scenario where robots dominate our world. While I do not believe we are facing an immediate catastrophe, the potential for such outcomes is something I worry about. (Interviewee #2, 27)

Concerned about his sudden job loss, I inquired about his next steps. He replied resiliently, 'I plan to dedicate this summer to furthering my education.' This response reflects a proactive approach to navigating the changes AI might bring, showcasing adaptability and foresight.

Reflecting upon these personal narratives underscores the importance of deeply understanding both the content and context of media narratives about AI and automation. These stories are not isolated; they are shaped by and also shape the dominant social, economic, and political climates. They influence public perception and inform policy decisions, demonstrating the profound societal impacts of emerging technologies. How these narratives are constructed and engaged can significantly affect societal perceptions of the potential and risks associated with AI technologies.

In final thoughts, as we advance into the digital age, the interplay between media narratives, public perception, and technological development becomes increasingly complex. This thesis serves as a reminder of the power of media and the imaginaries in contributing to shape our understanding of and responses to technological changes, highlighting the critical need for robust media literacy to ensure these changes are navigated thoughtfully and inclusively.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 — Ethics Acknowledgement

This research involves several ethical considerations, particularly concerning the use of public online discussions from Reddit for data analysis. It examines user comments, interactions, and behaviours without direct consent from the users. However, since Reddit is publicly accessible and their comment is openly available for viewing by anyone, including those without a Reddit account, the data shared there is considered public. This public status legitimises its use for research purposes, as it is already exposed to broad public viewing and potential analysis. In contrast, for the semi-structured interviews conducted as part of this study, explicit consent was obtained from all participants. Consent forms, included in Appendix 3, were signed by participants, who thereby agreed to the use of their responses as research data, ensuring ethical compliance in handling personal responses and data.

Appendix 2 — Recruitment post on the subreddit r/futurology

The following content was used to recruit the interview participants:

Hey there,

I am a second-year master's student from Lund University, Sweden, majored in Communication and Media Studies. Currently, I am doing a thesis to graduate in the summer, a research on the topic 'media audience' engagement with news about AI, especially the opinion that it might replace human at work. I am looking for several people to interview. Are you:

- tech-savvy, meaning you have a big interest in technology.
- interested in AI technologies and want to share your thoughts on the topic
- from 27 to 47 years old. Gender does not matter.
- currently working in tech or creative fields, such as IT, programming, automation, marketing, design, copywriting.
- living in Stockholm, Sweden.

The interview will take about 25 to 45 minutes and will take place from February 1 to February 28, 2024. I will ask questions about your professional background, and your experience in engaging with media contents on the topic. The data will be used within the confinement of the master's thesis in my programme at the Communication and Media department at Lund University. You will need to give your consent by confirming a form, and the interview will be recorded (only audio).

The interview can be done online or if you are in Stockholm, I am happy to meet up, fika, and talk in person. If you match the description above and are available, comment in the post or send me a private message! Thank you in advance!

Appendix 3 — Consent form

The consent form was sent to the participants via their email a day before the interview. The consent form was in a PDF format, and it was signed digitally with their full legal name. Furthermore, at the beginning of the interview, the participants were asked to verbally confirm his or her consent before recording the interview. The interviews were conducted either in-person and used mobile phone voice recording. The name and information that could reveal the interviewees' identities were not used throughout the essay and appendices. The consent form is as follows:

This research explores Reddit users' engagement with AI narratives about job displacement. I will ask several questions surrounding the topic. The interview will last around 25-45 minutes. The data will only be used within the confinement of an essay in my master's thesis 'Understanding Audience Engagement With Perceived Societal Impacts Of AI Technologies On Job Displacement' for the program Master's in Communication and Media Studies at Lund University.

I would like to record the interview and use the transcript to present my findings. I will record the interview only with your consent. Please feel free to say as much or as little as you want. You can decide not to answer questions or stop the interview whenever you want.

I ensure that your identity will remain anonymous.

If you agree to take part in this study, please sign your name below:

(Your full name)

(Date)

Appendix 4 — Interview List

The table below shows details of the interview participants for this research

Interviewee	Age	Job title	Interview Date
#1 (Pilot)	41	Software Product Developer	1/2/2024
#2	27	Technical Assembler	2/2/2024
#3	28	Software Engineer	2/2/2024
#4	32	IT Business Consultant	3/2/2024
#5	35	IT Project Manager	2/2/2024
#6	27	IT Project Manager	3/2/2024
#7	33	Content Manager	3/2/2024
#8	42	Software Engineer	4/2/2024
#9	36	Commercial Translator	4/2/2024
#10	38	Marketing Manager	14/2/2024
#11	37	Chief Technology Officer	15/2/2024
#12	38	Marketing Automation Lead	20/2/2024

Appendix 5 — Codebook

After all the interviews were transcribed and all Reddit comments on the selected thread were collected. They were organised into the coding document. This document is stored in my personal cloud storage on Drive.

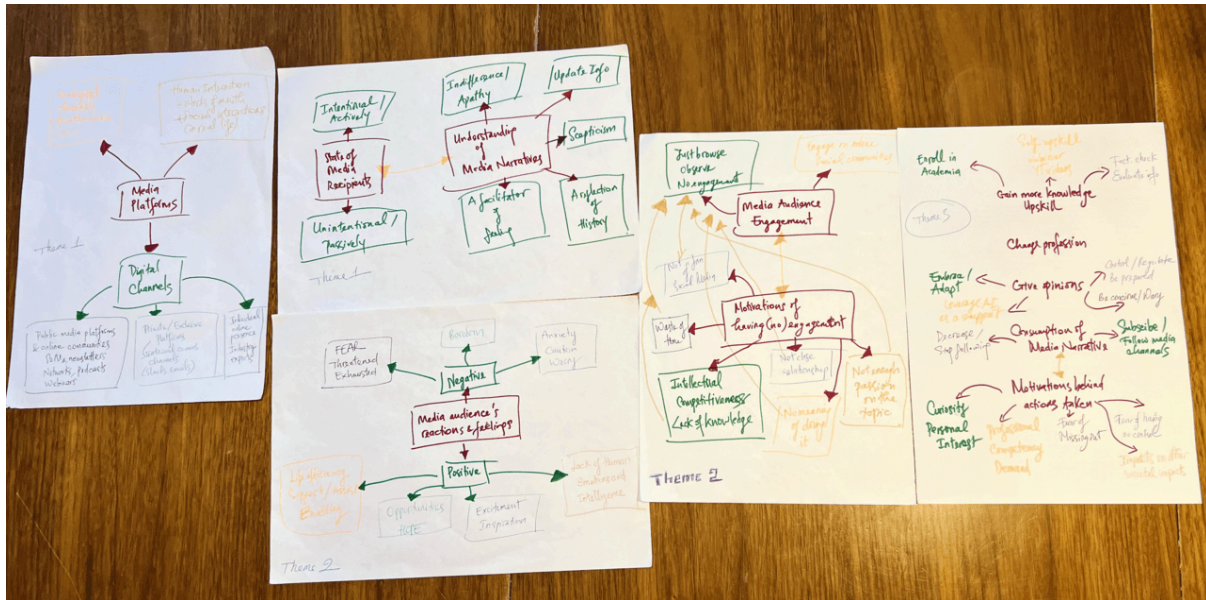
Theme 1: AI Narratives Engagement <i>*How AI narratives are distributed and engaged with</i> <i>*How tech-savvy audiences and users understand AI narratives on job displacement</i>		
Media platforms On which media platforms do audiences and users access, absorb and engage with AI narratives?	Digital channels	*public media platforms and online communities: social media networks, podcasts, news websites, newsletters, webinars *private/exclusive platforms: internal communication channels *Individual online presence: online profiles or mentions of thought leaders, industry experts
	Non-digital channels: printed media materials, television	
	Human interactions: words of mouth, social interactions	
State of media engagement In which state were the audiences and users in when engaging with AI narratives?	Intentionally / Actively	
	Unintentionally / Passively	
Understanding AI narratives How do audiences and users engaged with and understand AI narratives on job displacement?	Indifference / Apathy	
	Update information	
	Scepticism	
	A facilitator of feelings	
	A reflection of history	

Theme 2: Audience and user engagement with AI narratives and their perceived societal impact on job displacement <i>*What are the audiences and users' reactions, and what are their engagements to AI narratives on job displacement</i> <i>*What are the motivations, or the lack of them, for the engagements to occur</i>		
Audiences and users' reactions and feelings What are the reactions and feelings as a result from understanding and engaging with AI narratives about job displacement	Positive	Life-efficiency enhancement
		Support / Assist / Enable
		Opportunities / Hope
		Excitement / Inspiration
	Lack of human emotions and intelligence	
Negative	Fear / Threatened / Exhausted	
	Anxiety / Caution / Worry	
	Boredom	
Media audiences and users' engagement	Just browse / observe / no engagement	
	Engage on online social communities	
Motivations of having (no) engagements What drive the audiences and users to engage, or not engage?	Intellectual competitiveness / Lack of knowledge	
	Waste of time / No time	
	Not close relationship	
	No meaning (of doing it)	
	Not enough passion on the topic	
	Not a fan of social media platforms	

Theme 3: Actions taken from understanding and engaging with AI narratives about job displacement	
Gain more knowledge / Upskill	Enroll in academia
	Self-upskill: webinars, video tutorials
	Fact-check / Evaluate information
Change profession	
Give opinion on how should we treat AI advancements	Embrace / Adapt
	Leverage AI as an advocacy
	Control / Regulate / Be well-prepared
	Be conscious / Wary
Consumption of media narratives	Decrease/Stop following
Motivations behind actions taken	Subscribe/Follow media channels
	Curiosity/Personal interest
	Professional competency demands
	Fear of missing out / staying updated
	Fear of no control over AI's potential
	Impacts on other societal aspects

Appendix 6 — Spidermap of Codes

The photo below illustrates how the codes in codebook connects and interact with each other. The photo was taken on 29 March, 2024.



Appendix 7 — Transcription — Interview #5

Date and Time: 03 February, 2024 - 15:00. **Duration:** 33:23. **Location:** Stockholm, Sweden

Legend: Q - Author, A - Interviewee

Background: 35 years old Male from Germany, current living and working in Stockholm.

Occupation: IT project manager in Human Resource department for an international retailer.

Q: Please tell me a bit about you: your career background, your expertise / job functions, your current job position and the industry you are working in?

A: I grew up in Berlin and studied business administration, majored in business informatics. During my studies, I formed my own company and a network of technicians, which is mainly a networks for events and such kind. It was quite an experience. However, I sold my parts of the company when I was around 21. And after that, when I was around 22, I moved from Berlin to a smaller city called Schwarz. I worked in the global IT department for as a consultant for HR systems, meaning that I supported and developed the established SAP system (System Applications and Products in Data Processing). And ten years later I moved to Sweden and became the IT project manager in the local team here. I do almost the same thing, focusing on the Swedish market and more on the integration and management part than before. Before that, it was more about choosing the right products, making the right designs and concepts and consulting the HR colleagues.

Q: Where did you find the updates and new info about AI development? On which media platforms? How do you look for information or updates about AI?

A: I just follow ChatGPT and Dall-E development directly on their (LinkedIn) pages and see which new versions are launched, what are the new features, then test them out myself. I teach myself a bit about using it, so I'm not going to be completely lost. There are tons of AI models which have huge potential or even already running effectively in their specific industry, which I've never heard of. I just follow tech news in general and that's how I usually catch up with some AI news. I follow world news, for instance, Reuters, who publish articles that truly go into groundbreaking discoveries.

I read about AI developments, but I'm not actively following AI that much. Because, myself, I'm quite drawn back from social media. I'm not a big fan of how social media has developed and impacted our society. So I personally don't use it as much. With the exception of LinkedIn for professional usage or as an end user, and Youtube where it's less about discussing with other people or really participating in the community, but rather consuming. I follow the discussions around AI on a curated level, for instance, newspapers, tech blogs or tech articles in general.

Q: There have been talks on news and social media about AI taking the place of many jobs and affecting the employability of humans. What is your opinion on that statement? Do you think it is more of hope, risk, threat, or opportunity for the future of technology and human employment?

A: In my opinion, it depends on the sector. I think it's a guarantee that it only becomes a supportive tool, and the creative aspect still remains in human hands when it comes to productive sectors for production of goods, non-creative kinds or even development of concepts, and so on. I think it's just a natural next step to implement tools to calculate or design certain processes. We have had those software solutions before which were not AI-based and still created the same discussion about 'oh, doesn't that get rid of jobs?' Yeah, it will get rid of jobs. Absolutely. And it will create new jobs. People who know how to prompt AI correctly. People who filter information with AI, correcting people who curate results from AI, correcting people who configure AI correctly. So I'm not saying jobs created by AI is going to become proportional to the jobs lost that remains to be seen. From a historical point of view, every time we had an industrial revolution, it always ended up like that. And in the best case scenario, it does end up that good, and the society becomes more prosperous, because the result and means due to an increase, maybe even enables us to live better lives and work less.

Q: When you saw that statement (AI replacing people at work) in the media, what was your reaction and actions? Did you engage in the discussion?

A: I saw those headlines (about AI technologies are going to replace human jobs) on the media and social media. If it affects my view of AI's benefits to society? Yes, it does, and I think everyone who says it does not is either not aware of it, or actively lying to him or herself. It is impossible to create an opinion completely on your own without relying on any external information factors. The existence of a discussion

with AI, for instance, is a threat to certain countries. It is a topic, but it would not be an active discussion without involvement of the media. So yes, of course, it does influence my opinion, or rather in my case, I would say it encourages me to look into it and form my own opinion. And I hope that other people do it as well and not just follow the trend of what the media says, 'oh no' or 'oh yes'. It depends which media you consume, but whether you are negatively or positively influenced, I think it really depends on how you personally evaluate the usage in the long term.

I'm not someone who really actively contributes to discussions when it comes to online discussions. It takes so much energy with online discussions without proper moderation. I know some platforms do a good job of moderation, but it is just exhausting and just feels like a waste of energy. I have these discussions with friends and colleagues, or in an industrial context. It's an official, it's a direct discussion. It's not a block discussion where you talk or discuss with unknown people. I mean, you can discuss with someone, but with online discussions, you don't have any direct connection, you don't know anything about each other. I think it's the same problem for everyone. We are aware of it. We read about it but then no one engage or feel a need to debate about it because it doesn't work. I think that might actually be because of the complexity of it. I don't understand to its full extent, many people don't understand enough to really want to contribute.

Q: From what you saw on the media and through experience, what is your general opinion on AI development and how it contributes to human efficiency in daily life?

A: We have already seen that sometimes it's (AI) indistinguishable but difficulty, however, I'm still interested in it. I'm relatively open to it if it's able to produce a content. But then the question remains, if it is supposed to be like that? The whole meaning of human life should be about developing yourself and creating art, to create all these wonderful things our world consists of. Should it be replaced or even coexist? That's the thing you should after discussion. I hope to see AI in the future mostly as a supporter for the end user.

I still think AI is in its infancy, all the technologies we used before calling themselves AI were nothing more than a statement. But we're getting to a point now of self improving software and it will affect our society to a major extent. And therefore, in my opinion, we need to start to regulate it to a healthy extent. I'm not saying to completely restrict it, but we're getting to the point where we need to create regulations, especially in the art sector where I'm most sceptical about it (AI-generated products). Not because I don't think it produces good results, but rather because I think it's against human nature to replace the creative factor of a human being with AI creativity.

However, it should be regulated in a way that is to support artists for instance. And when it comes to the developments, we still have so much potential things we haven't touched or worked on, and it's still not accessible to us going back to or going forward to even the most futuristic view like in the 80s 90s 20s

movies, where the original idea of AI before it even really was implemented, came into the creative sector. I would look forward to it, but we need to regulate both on an ethical level at some point, and an industry level to make sure that it won't become more destructive than productive.

And one thing I want to add, most importantly, I think there is a very negative development of AI, when it comes to news. News are being more and more often created by AI technology, especially fake news. AI can be used to produce fake news on a mass level, for propaganda and for delusional purposes to make sure that it's more and more difficult for people to actually filter out what's correct, to create a distorted view of reality. That's something I think is extremely difficult. And the only way to resolve it in my opinion is probably counter strike. Check the sources and make sure that what has been produced is factually correct.

Q: Do you think you can live without AI?

A: I'm not saying it's not going to get to that point, but in my opinion, similar to an industrial revolution. And when, for instance, the first of the second industrial revolution happened, people could still imagine life about it in the first couple of years, and then it changed. And we are, in my opinion, still in these first couple of years, I would say it takes probably a decade, maybe less, for it to be publicly so accepted and integrated in both the industry and personal life, to the point it becomes irreplaceable. Or when people become - I don't want to say dependent - but accustomed to it. But I don't want to miss it. I always think about how we are so dependent, but on the super good side.

Q: Do you take any course or join any educational training (webinars from experts, join community workshops for example) about AI?

A: I think this will be required in the future to properly work with those AI models. I have not had official training, mostly because I think the current trainers do not yet fully grasp it. But that will change. We will have experts using it and being able to teach it. Right now, it is so deep in its infant phase that everyone can try to find its parents. We are still at a stage where it feels like everyone is trying to figure out who the experts are. There might be some good courses around there, but most of them are basic. So I've joined some, or rather, watched some tutorials on Youtube or read some guides about people finding the best profitable prompts to use or integrations to use. And there will be official trainings in my job perspective as well, at some point, once it's properly implemented. But as of now, this year or next year, I don't see any official training on my end coming up. In the future, I'm of course open to it.

Q: Do you think AI might take over and make your job redundant one day?

A: Of course, at some point. But we are looking into like a far future of maybe 20-30-40 years. Who knows? Because I don't think that the interface between AI and human is ever going to be really replaceable. You need to be trained properly to use AI. You still need to curate information effectively and you still need to know to give AI proper feedback in order to give good results. And most importantly, you

need even to know what you want yourself. By my experience, I think many programs, end users just happily entered yet don't know what they want. So you gotta have to have someone managing an interface. So I don't think my position is threatened. I think my position will just shift, it will implement and incorporate AI in certain measures of project controlling. I'd be happy for it to be replaced by AI or certain other tools which make my life easier and more productive. But I don't think in the near future or even midterm future, it's going entirely replace my job by some AI IT project manager.

Q: How did AI become your interest? Tell me about your 'love/hate story' with AI. Was it from the first sight, or a longer journey with certain hiccups and milestones?

A: That's a bit difficult to answer. The predecessor of AI has been around for quite some time, or things which were called AI but weren't AI have been around quite a while. But it didn't really affect anyone in job market back then. But when it became apparent that AI might, let's say, replace current jobs, which is most of the discussions in the media, for instance, I still don't feel any negative thoughts about it. Because in my opinion, it's still a tool. Maybe it's because AI is still in its 'infancy', as I see the development it's doing right now, I see it more of an assistant. So I'm looking forward to using more of it.

Q: In what aspects- both personal life and professional- does AI connect/relate to you?

A: I use it for note taking. I have a software in meetings where people give their consent, because, you obviously need to record the meeting. In order to do that, we use an AI model to write basically an abstract, and the most important key points, which I then afterwards still have to review. It works surprisingly well, saves me some time, but it's a completely optional thing. I sometimes use ChatGPT more for myself to learn how to use prompts correctly and most efficiently. Because, let's be honest, we are still not super end-user friendly, like the marketing campaigns, you still kind of need to know how to handle it too. And I use it as end-products like in media, in upscaling for graphics. I train myself and get myself more accustomed to the tools.

All my uses of GPT and Dall-E are only in personal life because most companies still have restrictive usage in these cases, because you need to keep in mind that the AI database is used on external servers. So at the moment, a business, any kind of a global business wants to use these tools, they need to create a closed environment first. Otherwise you risk data leakage. In other words, I have no access to any tool in my work that I might need. Just keep in mind the moment you type in prompts, you're feeding the model data and the model in its next version has access to that data. If someone else asks about it, of course, it's not that simple, it's not publicly accessible immediately or through a direct way, but you're still feeding that information. So especially for very big companies who have a very strong focus on software security or information security, that's not going to be ok. You can use GPT and create basically a copy in a closed environment which then handles the internal information correctly and not makes it publicly available. You can feed it back wrong information as well. You can use it for propaganda purposes and so on. So you need to be extremely careful which feedback you actually accept from the end user. Not every feedback is being

fed in, it's usually being filtered, it's usually being curated to some extent also by hard guidelines within the AI model.

Q: Which specific types of AI development are most attractive to you? And why is that?

- **Generative AI: chatGPT, Dall-E etc.**

- **Virtual assistants and chatbots: Siri, Alexa, Google Assistant**

- **Autonomous vehicles: self driving cars for example**

A: We have already working on AI software solutions for autonomous cars. They work best if no human drivers involved. So some AI solutions simply don't work because the human error factor is too big. I myself for instance, by principle, against the personal use of cars, except if you live on the countryside or you have special needs, then it's totally fine, of course, but for the normal and to drive from, say, your home to office and so on, no. So many streets are just blocked because people drive the same route. Well, they could just share the vehicles, for instance, an autonomous AI, for instance, could, in that case, create autonomous cars which are shared. That's just something I'm really looking forward to. That's just one example, Generative AI is a bit more difficult because Generative AI can dilute markets very easily. For instance, in the creative industry, producing music, pictures, entertainment solutions or art, which kind of contradict the meaning of art itself because art is supposed to be, in my opinion, the emotional representation of human beings in certain time frames. And I don't think AI can properly reflect art, it can only imitate. This leads to a more diluted marketing. Same for music. Maybe it's going to be incorporated. But I think it will never be used completely alone by itself to create a product. Art, music or anything created by human is involved in and with emotions. I might be wrong maybe at some point.

Q: To what extent do you trust information provided by these AI tools?

A: Oh, not at all. GPT is just a language model. It's not a news model, it's not a model which is supposed to give you factual information. At some point, it might get to that point. I'm not saying it's never going to be the case, but the database is. For instance, if you use GPT-3 right now, it has only access to information up until 2020. And if I ask it about current events, it obviously couldn't answer or it gives me straight out wrong replies. And the AI tends to not be aware of it. So it gives you wrong information with full confidence and people are if they read something, which sounds factual, very easily convinced that it's right. So no, with Generative AI, and news and information, I'm extremely sceptical.