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EXPERTS TAKE

Who Controls Information Now? AI Search, Journalism, and Democratic Risk

An Interview with Dr Joanne Kuai

In an era where artificial intelligence is reshaping how information is produced, distributed, and consumed, understanding the implications for journalism and democratic governance has never been more urgent. Few scholars bridge these worlds as effectively as Dr. Joanne Kuai, a former journalist and now a postdoctoral researcher at RMIT University, Australia. Her work examines how AI and algorithmic systems influence news production, political communication, and global information flows with a particular emphasis on China, comparative media systems, and governance challenges.

She holds a PhD from Karlstad University, Sweden, and is an Affiliate of the ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society (ADM+S). Joanne teaches in the JournalismAI Academy at Polis, LSE, and contributes regularly to the New Books Network podcast. Her work has appeared in leading journals including Telecommunications Policy, Digital Journalism, *and* New Media & Society. *Before entering academia, Joanne worked as a reporter, editor, and news anchor in China.*

Drawing on extensive empirical research, from audits of generative AI–powered search engines to interviews with journalists across continents, Dr. Kuai investigates how new technologies redistribute power, challenge long-standing journalistic norms, and create both opportunities and vulnerabilities in the information ecosystem. Her insights are especially relevant for policymakers, researchers, journalists, and industry stakeholders navigating the rapidly evolving landscape of AI-mediated communication.

In this edition of Experts Take, we explore the risks, responsibilities, and future directions of journalism and governance in the algorithmic age. This interview was conducted by SCSA-IPA Research Intern Anahita Poursafir.

Anahita Poursafir: What drew you to study the intersection of AI, journalism, and governance, and why do you think this moment is so critical?

Joanne Kuai: My interest in this topic began as a very personal question: how to be human in the age of artificial intelligence? Before becoming a researcher, I worked as a journalist myself. Around 2017 and 2018, newsrooms were full of excitement about data, automation, and AI-driven innovation. Much of that optimism focused on efficiency and new storytelling formats. But what concerned me more was something quieter and deeper: how technology was beginning to reshape not just how news is produced, but how it is distributed—and ultimately, what the public gets to see.

That question became especially striking in the Chinese context, where the relationship between the state, technology companies, and journalism is complicated, dynamic and politically charged. By comparing China with the U.S. and the EU, we could see how different political, social, and economic systems shape the role AI plays in journalism. AI is not neutral. It reflects values, incentives, and power structures.

This moment is critical because AI systems are now actively structuring visibility, credibility, and access to information—often without meaningful democratic oversight. Governments are racing to become rule-setters, while companies move faster than regulation can keep up. We have seen this before with social media. For years, platforms claimed they were "tech companies, not media companies," which allowed them to avoid responsibility under frameworks like Section 230 in the U.S. The consequences are now painfully clear. With AI, we still have a chance to do better. We can learn from past mistakes and build governance frameworks that ensure technology companies share responsibility for the information systems they create—before these systems become too deeply embedded to change.

Poursafir: One of the most striking aspects of your recent work is your systematic auditing of AI-powered search engines during major political events. Your multilingual audit of Copilot, for instance, revealed significant discrepancies in accuracy, sourcing, and political neutrality. What do these findings tell us about the risks that AI-powered search engines pose during elections and other politically sensitive moments?

Kuai: One crucial thing to understand about AI-powered search engines is that they don't simply show you information, they generate answers. These answers feel authoritative and complete, but they are shaped by design choices made by developers, companies, and the regulatory environments they operate in. In that sense, AI search engines don't just reflect reality; they actively frame it.

In our multilingual audit of Microsoft Copilot during the 2024 Taiwan presidential election, we found serious problems. The system made factual errors, misattributed sources, omitted key political actors, and showed clear inconsistencies across languages. For example, German-language outputs

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tended to contain fewer factual mistakes, likely because of stronger scrutiny from civil society and regulators. But fewer mistakes did not mean less bias. In some cases, certain candidates or viewpoints were repeatedly left out.

When we tried to compare this with Chinese AI tools, the contrast was even sharper. Asking about Taiwan's presidential election produced answers that reframed it as a "regional leadership selection" and repeatedly asserted that Taiwan is an inseparable part of China. This is not accidental; it is built into the system.

The real danger here is not always obvious misinformation. It can be this quiet distortion. AI systems can subtly reinforce political narratives, normalise certain framings, and narrow the range of perspectives users encounter—all while appearing neutral and helpful. During elections, these tools act not only as gatekeepers, but as unaccountable agenda-setters. Errors and biases scale instantly and globally, without editors, corrections, or transparency. That makes public vigilance, regulation, and continued scrutiny absolutely essential.

Poursafir: Your comparative work shows that generative AI often favors English-language sources and marginalizes local perspectives. What are the broader geopolitical consequences of this linguistic and cultural imbalance in AI-mediated information retrieval?

Kuai: This issue goes far beyond language. At its core, it is about epistemic inequality—about whose knowledge counts and whose realities become visible. Generative AI systems consistently privilege English-language sources, especially platforms like Wikipedia, Reddit, or large, well-established Western media outlets. Local journalism, regional media, and minority-language perspectives are far more likely to be overlooked.

Even when AI companies sign licensing agreements with news organizations, these partnerships are uneven and poorly implemented. Large, well-resourced outlets have the bargaining power to negotiate visibility, while smaller and local newsrooms are left behind. Technically, even tools like retrieval-augmented generation struggle to surface timely, accurate, and context-rich local information.

As a result, AI becomes a kind of soft geopolitical actor. It exports particular worldviews—often Global North perspectives—and presents them as universal. This reshapes how political events, conflicts, and social issues are understood across borders. It also reinforces existing power imbalances in the global information order.

The danger is not just homogenization, but confirmation. Instead of challenging our assumptions, AI systems often reinforce what dominant groups already believe. Minority voices, alternative interpretations, and local knowledge become harder to access, even though they are crucial for democratic debate, multiculturalism, and social justice.

When AI systems privilege English-language sources, they are not simply translating the world. They are reordering it—creating a hierarchy of knowledge that determines whose voices matter and whose political realities remain unseen.

Poursafir: You distinguish between algorithmic journalism and journalistic AI. Why is this conceptual shift important for preserving human judgment, accountability, and democratic values in the newsroom?

Kuai: This distinction matters because it forces us to put people—not technology—at the center of journalism. When I was refining my PhD project, one of the senior scholars encouraged me to shift the focus from "AI in newsrooms" to "journalism as an institution in the age of AI." That advice stayed with me.

Algorithmic journalism adapts journalism to technology. It asks how news can be optimized for algorithms, metrics, and efficiency. Journalistic AI

does the opposite: it adapts technology to journalism. It starts by asking what journalism is for—accuracy, accountability, public service—and then considers how technology might support those values.

This difference is crucial because journalism is not just another creative industry. News is non-fiction. It deals with facts, evidence, and competing interpretations of reality. Human judgment is essential—not only to decide what is true, but to reflect on values, ethics, and responsibility.

If something goes wrong in an AI-assisted newsroom, someone must still be accountable. Machines cannot take responsibility; people must. Without humans firmly "in the loop," democratic accountability collapses. We risk turning journalism into a system driven by optimization rather than public interest. If we fail to make this distinction, technological capability will begin to define journalistic norms. But journalism should be guided by democratic values — and technology should serve those values, not replace them.

Poursafir: As both a former journalist and a researcher, how do you see reporters navigating the tension between responsible coverage of emerging technologies and institutional pressures, especially in countries where political narratives shape media practice?

Kuai: Journalists today face enormous pressure—not only when covering emerging technologies, but in producing quality reporting of any kind. Economic constraints, shrinking newsrooms, and audience metrics leave many reporters with little time or resources to do the work they aspire to do. This creates real tension between speed, visibility, and depth. In many newsrooms, values are being quietly reoriented. Should journalism chase attention-grabbing headlines driven by clicks, or should it serve communities by helping people make informed decisions—about voting, public debate, or everyday life? This is not just a professional dilemma; it is an institutional one.

In my fieldwork in China, journalists shared their critical reflection of the technology, their professional roles, and the tensions they face. Even under very limited press freedom, many still hold strong journalistic ideals. They want to fulfil a civic role, to act as watchdogs where possible, and to contribute something meaningful to society. The space for doing so is constrained, but it is not empty.

This is not unique to China. Even in democratic systems, commercial and political pressures shape coverage in powerful ways. Yet the continued existence of reporters pushing against these limits—in different contexts and forms—matters. As long as these conversations and efforts persist, journalism retains the possibility of renewal rather than surrender.

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Poursafir: Your analysis of copyright regimes in the U.S., EU, and China shows divergent approaches to AI-generated news. What do these differences tell us about how states are using copyright strategically, and what might a workable global regulatory model look like?

Kuai: Copyright has always been more than a technical legal issue. It is a strategic tool that reflects how states balance innovation, power, and public interest. In the U.S., copyright law does not recognize AI-generated works as protectable, largely because of its strong emphasis on human authorship.

In the EU, there is an articulated desire to protect press publishers and media freedom, especially against the power of platforms. However, the resulting policies are fragmented and uneven. In practice, they often benefit large publishers while placing smaller newsrooms at a disadvantage.

China takes a very different approach. There, copyright, journalism, and technology are instrumentalized to serve state interests. AI-generated content can be protected without recognizing the machine as an author, allowing platforms to hold rights in the name of innovation. This encourages technological development, but often at the expense of journalistic autonomy and individual reporters' rights.

What all these systems show is that copyright primarily protects economic power. Fair use and similar exceptions, originally designed to encourage creativity, have been stretched by large tech companies in ways that further concentrate resources and influence.

A single global model may not be realistic or even desirable. But agreement on basic principles—dignity, fairness, transparency, and reducing inequality—is both possible and necessary if journalism is to survive sustainably in the AI era.

Poursafir: Given the growing concentration of power among a small number of AI developers, how should governments and news institutions rethink autonomy, accountability, and sovereignty in an increasingly AI-driven information environment?

Kuai: Today, a small number of AI developers increasingly mediate our public knowledge infrastructure. News organizations depend on tools they do not control, built on data and standards they did not set. This creates dangerous dependency without leverage.

Autonomy can no longer be defined only as editorial independence. It now includes control over data, infrastructure, and technological standards. Governments need to think beyond narrow regulation and invest in institutional capacity—including public alternatives.

It does not have to be this way. Stronger and enforced antitrust regulation could encourage healthier competition. Open-source initiatives offer another path, reducing dependency on a handful of private actors. Governments could also play a more active role in developing public-interest technologies.

Consider projects like Google Books. When Google scanned vast collections under the banner of fair use, it avoided properly compensating authors and publishers. If similar projects were led as public initiatives, we could have more transparent discussions about shared resources, access, and responsibility. This brings us back to the idea of the commons. Public service media and non-profit journalism models also matter more than ever. They remind us that journalism does not have to be driven solely by profit or clicks—and that healthier information ecosystem in the AI age requires public imagination, not just private innovation.

Poursafir: Your studies of Chinese journalists covering AI show that they simultaneously act as watchdogs and guardians of state narratives. What do these hybrid roles reveal about the possibilities and limits of critical journalism in authoritarian or constrained media systems?

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Kuai: These hybrid roles show that journalism is rarely all or nothing. Even in highly constrained systems, journalists are not simply mouthpieces, nor are they pure dissidents. They often occupy complex positions—acting as limited watchdogs while also maintaining state narratives.

There is always an element of idealism in journalism. People do not enter this profession purely for money. Even under restrictions, many journalists still want to do good. What "good" means can vary by context, but the desire to contribute remains.

In China, covering AI has sometimes created space for cautious critique—focusing on social impacts, labor issues, or ethical concerns—while still aligning with broader national goals. This reveals both the possibilities and the clear limits of critical journalism under constraint. These cases challenge simplistic ideas of propaganda versus resistance. They show that journalism adapts, negotiates, and survives in different forms—even when freedom is limited.

Poursafir: Across your research, what important risks or emerging dynamics in AI and political communication do you think policymakers, journalists, and tech companies are currently underestimating but will become major concerns within the next five years?

Kuai: I think one thing more worthy of our attention is infrastructure. Beyond competition over AI models, there are data centers, cloud systems, supply chains, and enormous environmental costs. These material foundations of AI are often invisible in public debate, yet they shape who benefits and who bears the burden.

There is also hidden human labor—from data annotation to content moderation—that remains largely unacknowledged. AI is far more labor-intensive than its "automation" narrative suggests. Governance tends to be reactive. Principles are discussed only after harms emerge. We need to set values and safeguards earlier—and also invest in alternatives, resistance, and public-interest models.

Five years ago, few people cared about AI. Today, many are experiencing the same existential questions I faced earlier: what does it mean to be human in the age of AI? How do we relate to each other through technology? Or even, how do we relate to machines? Only by reflecting collectively on these questions can we make better choices—not just about AI, but about the kind of societies we want to live in.