2 Interview with Nick Diakopoulos

[00:00:12] Sil What is AI ethics? To learn more, I spoke to Nick Diakopoulos, associate professor in communication studies and computer science at Northwestern University and director of the Computational Journalism Lab. He spoke to me about AI ethics and the development of AI systems safe for newsrooms to use.

[00:00:34] Nick Yeah. So I run the computational journalism lab at Northwestern University, and I've also been running a blog, the Generative AI in the Newsroom blog. And so I've sort of had a little bit of an overview of generative AI and how it's been used in news production and research. We've built some research tools in my lab that incorporate generative AI for creating angles on news content to help journalists kind of creatively ideate about different frames or angles that might be worth pursuing on content like press releases or scientific articles, things of that nature. And typically we build a tool, we prototype a tool, and then we test it with journalists to see how it's working and how they're responding and reacting to it. So that's kind of one angle that I've been thinking about.

[00:01:38] Nick And then I'm seeing kind of a lot of different use cases pop up in the context of the Generative AI in the Newsroom blog. In terms of story discovery, in terms of, you know, rewriting content or checking style and grammar, or generating headlines or summarization, that's really probably one of the biggest, most frequently mentioned use cases. And in that sense, you know, these language models are really new opportunities as a researcher to understand the impact and possibilities for improving journalism, for finding new stories, for making work more efficient, and things of that nature.

[00:02:44] Nick I mean, I started the blog in January, and I think early on, you know, people were very concerned about accuracy. People are still concerned about accuracy and hallucination on these models. People are concerned about provenance and attribution. They're concerned about confidentiality, privacy of information that they input into these models. There's a lot of concern about copyright, plagiarism, those kinds of issues. Copyright I think it's maybe grown in concern level. I mean, it was always a concern that I was hearing from folks, even from early on but that seems to be accelerating. Yeah, people are concerned about biases to some extent. You know, the fact that these models learn societal biases. Yeah, I think that that kind of covers the gamut in terms of what I've been hearing from folks.

[00:03:45] Nick And just in general, I would say also, you know, people want to know the big question is how is it going to impact my job? Is it going to take away my work? Or is it going to change my work in a way that is uncomfortable or forces me to, you know, adjust my skills or have to you know, essentially change the job in a way that maybe I'm not happy about? And I sense that there's still some fear around that. And you know, my approach is that these tools are going to change work, but I don't see them as fundamentally substituting journalists. I see them more as complementary tools where, you know, you use an LLM or generative AI but there needs to be a lot of editorial oversight. There needs to be a lot of checking and tweaking and tuning and thinking carefully about prompting and how journalistic values get coded and communicated in prompts and so on. So I'm more hopeful actually, that the technology isn't going to get rid of jobs. I think in the context of the research we've done in my lab, mostly what I've seen is that introducing new AI technologies into the newsroom tends to create more work for people rather than less work. It's a little bit counterintuitive, but it makes sense if you think of the technology as complementary. So, you know, if you're complementing a person with an AI tool, you know, basically that means you need more and more human effort in order to pair with the AI
effort. And so AI might help you scale up an investigation to look at 100,000 documents, but maybe that means, you know, five times as many people or man hours to really edit the output from the AI.

[00:06:06] **Nick** So I think it's an interesting approach to think that these tools are going to really take away jobs and save so much time. And I think there's some newsrooms who are pursuing that and really want to just press the button and output some low quality content and then try to sell some low value ads from that content. You know, we're seeing that already. We're seeing some news organizations get caught with not having enough human attention to edit that content, to get it to a level of quality where it doesn't have errors in it. So I guess we'll see different variations of this. You know, we will see some low quality publishers who are able to just create content farms. But I think if we're talking about the high end of the spectrum kind of quality content, quality news, content, I do still very much see it as a complementary technology.