The Future of Journalism Education in the Age of AI

An international research programme

UNESCO Chair on Media and Information Literacy and Quality Journalism (UAB) · Gabinete de Comunicación y Educación (UAB) · UNESCO UNITWIN MILID Network
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Abstract

Artificial intelligence is transforming journalism in every dimension. Countless aspects are changing: professional work and employment; the structure and economics of the sector; the relationship between news organisations and their audiences; and the technological information systems through which content flows.

These changes do not only affect the structures of journalism; they are also experienced subjectively by the actors involved: professionals, students, educators and audiences. All of them build expectations about what AI will bring, and those expectations generate psychological processes and climates of hope, anxiety or resignation that shape behaviour and habits.

In this changing context, the system of journalism education will also change. It is already beginning to do so amid many unknowns and uncertainties, but with the conviction that change is necessary and that its role can be essential in facing what lies ahead. Moreover, the education system has an autonomy of its own which, given the context, should be put to good use.

The international research programme presented here aims to resolve many of these unknowns and to offer guidance to the different actors in the system and, specifically, to the system of journalism education.

To this end, it sets two objectives: a) to anticipate the possible scenarios for journalism on a 2036 horizon, and b) to propose, in relation to those scenarios, guidelines for action, in particular for journalism education.

The programme studies three interrelated objects:

- the transformation of the journalism sector, including employment, professional profiles and business models;
- the psychological and cultural conditions under which this transformation will take place —the social psychology of change, that is, how the expectations, attitudes and climates of opinion of the different actors are built, and how they condition adaptation—; and
- the new competences that these changes demand of both journalists and citizens in their relationship with journalism.

What is new is the connection. Existing international studies tend to measure either how newsrooms and audiences use AI or which competences individuals need. This programme brings together, in a single comparative design, the anticipation of changes in the sector, the expectations and collective climates that condition adaptation, and the actual state of journalism curricula and teaching.

As a prospective study, the programme brings together three complementary perspectives:

exploratory imagination, which builds qualitative scenarios of plausible futures; predictive prospection, which identifies regularities, patterns and trends; and strategic change, which defines how to act towards precise goals in the short, medium and long term.
The analysis —and, building on it, the construction of scenarios— is organised around three tensions that can already be observed in today's journalism and that operate between opposing poles: the first, between spectacularisation and understanding, mainly affects content and modes of production; the second, between concealment and transparency, chiefly concerns technological mediation; and the third, between fragmentation and integration, affects the constitution of the public sphere and society. None of these tensions has a predetermined outcome, and no one can say for certain which of their poles will prevail. For this reason, the scenarios will be built from the different ways in which the tensions may be resolved and combined.
To these prospective perspectives is added the theoretical and practical approach provided by media and information literacy (MIL), which includes AI literacy. MIL does not replace the analysis of the sector or of the social psychology of change; it connects them. It helps to study the new competences of journalists and citizens, and how education can contribute to them. It also helps to strengthen the critical awareness of the various actors —journalists, educators and the public— and to inform the regulation of the sector.
The programme takes a global and intercultural view: it studies the situation and future of journalism at both international and local level, combines a common international core with national and regional nodes, and offers models and guidelines for the exchange of experience and cooperation.
The programme is promoted by the UNESCO Chair on MIL and Quality Journalism (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona), in collaboration with the Gabinete de Comunicación y Educación of the same university, within the UNESCO UNITWIN MILID Network. Like any research project, it will have its own scientific teams, which will give it autonomy.
The central aim of the programme is to turn, starting now, foresight about journalism in 2036 into active and participatory policies for journalism education and for the institutions that shape it.

1. Why now

AI affects journalism at several levels:

- **Professional work:** how information is gathered, verified, written, edited and distributed, who is accountable for errors, which organisational systems are affected, and which jobs and professional profiles grow or decline.
- **Audiences:** AI is gradually becoming part of how people consume information. In the six countries the Reuters Institute has tracked since 2024, weekly use of generative AI rose from 34% to 51% in a single year (Simon et al., 2026). More and more people receive news through AI assistants and generative search. A 2025 study by 22 public service media organisations in 18 countries found that 45% of AI assistants' answers about the news had at least one significant problem (EBU & BBC, 2025).
- **Institutions:** newsrooms reorganise, companies in the sector and business models change, and news organisations depend more and more on technology providers, some of which compete with the traditional functions of journalism.
- **Systems:** platforms and AI companies increasingly control the infrastructure through which public information circulates, which raises questions of pluralism, regulation and trust.

- **Expectations:** journalists, students, educators and audiences form expectations about what AI will bring, and these generate psychological climates of hope, anxiety or resignation that shape how they adapt.

AI is moving fast, and it changes not only the tools but the conditions of public knowledge, deepening what Pérez Tornero (2020) calls the great mediatization. Journalism education is not changing at the same pace. Most current responses add tools or courses; few rethink what journalists need to learn, and for what kind of public sphere.

2. Analytical framework: sector, expectations, competences and tensions

The programme studies three interrelated objects. The first is **the transformation of the journalism sector as a whole**: employment and working conditions, emerging and declining occupations, business models and the dependence of news organisations on technology providers. Changes in education only make sense against what is happening to the jobs and organisations for which journalists are trained.

The second is **the social psychology of change**. Expectations about AI are built collectively, in newsrooms, classrooms and public debate, and they generate psychological climates of enthusiasm, anxiety, fatalism or resistance. These climates condition how journalists, educators and students adapt, and whether institutions are open to change. The programme will study how they form and how they can be addressed. This line draws on the sociology of expectations, which shows that shared expectations about a technology mobilise resources and help to bring about the futures they anticipate (Borup et al., 2006), and on the notion of emotional climate as a collective state linked to social structures (de Rivera, 1992).

The third is **the new competences** that these changes demand of journalists and of citizens in their relationship with journalism, and the ways in which education can contribute to them.

Media and information literacy connects the three objects. Journalism is an essential part of the MIL infrastructure, and through it of the infrastructure of democratic public life (Pérez Tornero, 2026). Its quality depends on audiences able to recognise and value verified information, on a technological architecture that does not penalise it, and on institutions that people can trust. AI puts pressure on all three. The key contribution of MIL is that critical awareness is needed by journalists and the public alike, and that this requires journalists to acquire new competences.

From this perspective, MIL has three dimensions that journalism education must address:

- **For journalists:** the capacity to understand, use and question AI systems while keeping independent professional judgement.
- **For audiences:** the capacity to find, assess and use information critically. Journalists can contribute to it by explaining their sources, methods and uses of AI.
- **For institutions:** newsrooms, universities and regulators that monitor technological risks, set rules and empower citizens.

Three tensions

Spectacularisation / understanding. Between a journalism that stages what governments, companies, parties and lobbies say, and one that investigates what they do. AI can multiply the stories or free up resources for investigation.

Concealment / transparency. Between a technological mediation that disappears from view

—the assistant answers, but no one knows who decides, who corrects or whom to hold to account— and one that shows its sources, distinguishes what is verified from what is conjecture, and makes accountability possible (Pasquale, 2015).

Fragmentation / integration. Between a divided public sphere —some with advanced AI and investigative journalism, others confined to cheap environments of entertainment and manipulation— and a common space in which everyone can know and act.

Each tension will be observed through indicators common to all nodes; for example, the share of stories based on statements as opposed to original reporting, or how accurately AI answers attribute their sources.

The common language of the programme is shared by all partners: information as a public good, and freedom of expression and access to information as recognised in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The idea of democratic infrastructure is the theoretical horizon of the promoting Chair; it is stated openly but is not a condition for taking part, and each node decides how to express it in its own context.

3. Objectives and questions

Central question. How should journalism education change to respond to AI and to strengthen a reliable, plural information ecosystem based on freedom of expression and the right to information?

Question 1 addresses the first objective; questions 2 and 3 establish the diagnosis and the gap; and question 4 addresses the second objective.

1. **Anticipation.** How might the three tensions evolve over the next ten years and, with them, journalistic work and employment, the news sector, audiences and information systems? What expectations and psychological climates surround that change?
2. **Diagnosis.** How are undergraduate and master's programmes in journalism and their educators responding to AI today, with what orientation, and how far is what curricula state from what is actually taught?
3. **Gap.** Where does current education fall short of what the scenarios require, and which competences keep their value across different futures?
4. **Response.** Which MIL-based changes in competences, curricula, teaching and institutions can close that gap, and how should they be adapted to each context?

4. Approach

Following an established typology in futures studies, which distinguishes predictive, explorative and normative scenarios (Börjeson et al., 2006), the programme combines three perspectives, applied to a common empirical core. The three tensions articulate them.

Exploratory imagination. Build a small set of scenarios for the journalism ecosystem up to 2036, from the possible combinations of the three tensions, through participatory workshops with journalists, educators, students and MIL actors. Each scenario states what drives it, what it would mean for journalists and audiences, and which early signals would show that it is taking shape.

Predictive prospection. Analyse regularities, patterns and trends with common indicators for each tension, together with employment and professional profiles, the adoption of AI in newsrooms, its use by audiences and changes in curricula over time. A Delphi consultation with experts will produce explicit forecasts that can be checked and revised.

Expectations and climates. A survey of journalists, educators and students will measure their expectations and the psychological climates surrounding AI. It will ask where each person places each tension on two planes: what they consider likely and what they consider desirable. The distance between the two is an indicator of the climate.
Strategic change. Define goals for the short, medium and long term and the decisions needed to reach them. Co-design models of change with each institution and, where possible, test them in pilot courses evaluated with a simple theory of change: what is expected to change, for whom, and how we will know.
Empirical core. The three perspectives converge on the current state of journalism education. Each node studies the undergraduate and master's programmes in journalism at participating universities, using an explicit, common selection criterion, on the basis of their study plans and the course guides for the reference academic year. A common record sheet captures where AI and MIL appear (competences, learning outcomes, content, teaching methods and assessment), with what orientation and in relation to which tension. Educators are studied through a common questionnaire and interviews, to compare what curricula state with what is actually taught.
The competences that journalism will need are identified through three routes: demand from the sector (job profiles and vacancies, interviews with newsroom managers), anticipation (scenarios and the Delphi consultation) and international reference frameworks, such as UNESCO's AI competency frameworks (UNESCO, 2024). Comparing those competences with what education offers makes it possible to identify gaps, lasting priorities and the competences that keep their value in any scenario.

5. Global and local tasks

Task	**Global level (common core)**	**Local level (national or regional nodes)**
Framework	Shared concepts, questions, ethical protocol and quality standards	Adapt terms and priorities to the national context and languages
Tensions and scenarios	Common indicators for the three tensions and global scenarios built from them	National evidence on each tension and adaptation of the scenarios to the media and regulatory system
Sector and employment trends	Common indicators and international analysis of trends in jobs, occupations and business models	National data on employment, news organisations and AI adoption
Expectations and climates	Common survey instrument on expectations and attitudes towards AI	Survey and focus groups with journalists, educators, students and audiences
Curriculum mapping	Common record sheet, selection criterion for undergraduate and master's	Map the undergraduate and master's programmes of the node's universities

	programmes, and an open international database	
Educators study	Common questionnaire and interview guide	Fieldwork with local educators
Gap analysis	Comparative synthesis across countries and regions	National diagnosis of gaps and priorities
Models of change	Shared design principles and a common MIL competence framework for journalism education	Locally adapted models of change and, where possible, pilot courses
Policy	International recommendations for UNESCO, the MIL Alliance and international bodies	Recommendations for universities, accreditation bodies and national authorities

The global level ensures that results can be compared; the local level ensures that they are useful where decisions are made.
All nodes share a common minimum core —the curriculum record sheet, the educators questionnaire and the indicators for the three tensions—, which guarantees comparability. The other activities are optional modules that each node takes up according to its capacity.

6. Network

The programme is promoted by the UNESCO Chair on MIL and Quality Journalism at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, building on more than two decades of work by the Gabinete de Comunicación y Educación on journalism, AI and MIL, including the Observatory for News Innovation in the Digital Society (OI2), created with RTVE in 2015.

- **UNESCO UNITWIN MILID Network:** the main platform for academic cooperation, with the *MILID Yearbook*, and the support of *MIL Magazine* and the MILID Summer and Winter Schools.
- **UNESCO MIL Alliance:** the link with education authorities, regulators, media, libraries and civil society. The programme could propose a thematic group on AI, journalism and education within it.
- **UNESCO Chairs** on MIL and on journalism, and the UNESCO Chairs in Communication: candidates to coordinate nodes or tasks. A first inventory is available.
- **News organisations,** especially public service media: partners for scenarios and pilots. Collaboration gives no control over the conclusions.

An ethical protocol protects researchers and data in contexts where these topics are sensitive.

7. First year

- **Months 1–3. Set-up.** Agree the common framework, the indicators for the three tensions, the curriculum record sheet, the questionnaire and the ethical protocol; test the record sheet at two institutions; confirm the first nodes.
- **Months 4–8. Anticipate and diagnose.** Measurement of the three tensions and trend

analysis, followed by scenario workshops. Mapping of undergraduate and master's programmes, educators study and expectations survey in each node.
- **Months 9–12. Confront and design.** Gap analysis; short-, medium- and long-term goals; first models of change and pilot designs; first comparative report.

Nodes can join later using the shared tools. Governance, budget and funding sources will be defined with the partners.

8. Expected results

- A monitor of the three tensions in journalism, with common indicators, and scenarios up to 2036 built from it.
- Trends in employment, occupations and business models in journalism.
- A study of expectations and psychological climates about AI among journalists, educators, students and audiences.
- An open international map of how undergraduate and master's programmes in journalism, and their educators, address AI and MIL.
- A comparative report on the gap between current education and future needs.
- A MIL and AI literacy competence framework for journalism education, tested against demand from the sector and against the scenarios.
- Locally adapted models of change and policy recommendations at institutional, national and international level.
- An open toolkit (curriculum record sheet, questionnaire, scenario workshop guide) and joint publications, including in the *MILID Yearbook* and *MIL Magazine*.

9. How to take part

Partners can join at three levels: as a **node coordinator** for a country or region; as a **task partner** in one activity, for example mapping the undergraduate and master's programmes at their own institution; or as an **expert** in the scenario workshops or the forecasting consultation. In return they gain access to the shared tools, international comparison, co-authorship of joint publications and participation in future funding proposals.

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