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The "Meta-intermediary" of News Access: The Reconstruction of Journalistic Authority in the Age of Generative AI

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Abstract

Generative AI, through a four-fold mechanism of "query translation-cross-source retrieval-content integration-discursive reformulation," packages multi-source information into coherent dialogues with itself as the narrative subject, thereby ascending to the position of a "meta-intermediary" situated above existing platforms. This process accomplishes the "re-intermediation" of already-mediated information. It not only reshapes the pathways of information access but, more profoundly, reconstructs journalistic authority. Beyond the traditional "institutional authority" and "platform authority," a new "model authority" emerges, based on anthropomorphic interaction and cognitive outsourcing. These three form a dynamically contested triangular structure, leading to structural impacts such as the narrowing of public agendas (agenda circuit-breaking), the stripping of news brand value (white-labeling), and the blurring of accountability. Accordingly, this paper argues that the governance paradigm must evolve from content control to the holistic regulation of cognitive structures. It proposes collaborative governance pathways, including constructing an "auditable chain of meaning generation," designing ecosystem-level accountability and value compensation mechanisms, and empowering news organizations to become dominant interpreters. This study seeks to move beyond the technical discourse of "channel substitution," offering new theoretical perspectives and policy insights for understanding the reorganization of power within the news ecosystem and the safeguarding of publicness in the era of intelligent communication.

Keywords

generative AI, meta-intermediation, journalistic authority, cognitive infrastructure, agenda circuit-breaking, collaborative governance

1. Introduction: The Shift in the Right to News Access

The contest over the "access point" to news and public information constitutes a foundational logic driving the evolution of the digital media ecosystem. From the "editorial distribution" of portals and the "keyword search" of search engines to the "algorithmic recommendation" of social platforms, each shift in the morphology of access has profoundly reshaped the structure of information flow and its underlying power dynamics. Currently, generative AI, represented by models like ChatGPT, is driving a new and fundamental

turn: the core action of public information acquisition is shifting from "entering keywords" into a search box and sifting through a flood of results oneself, to "initiating a natural language dialogue" within a chat interface and expecting a direct, integrated, and explanatory answer. This paradigm shift from "retrieval" to "interaction" signifies that conversational AI is ascending from a supplementary "tool application" to a dominant "front door" for news, becoming a new type of supernode positioned above traditional news organizations and existing platforms.

Generative AI's ascent to this "access point" stems from three fundamental breakthroughs inherent in its technological nature. The first is depth of understanding: Through large language models, generative AI performs semantic parsing and contextual reasoning of user intent, surpassing literal keyword matching to grasp the "implied meaning" of queries. The second is breadth of processing: Generative AI can retrieve, compare, and integrate multi-source, heterogeneous information from news websites, knowledge bases, social media, etc., in real-time, accomplishing cross-source synthesis. The third is generativity of output: Generative AI no longer merely provides an index of information but produces a new, structured narrative, melding facts, context, analysis, and summary into an anthropomorphic, coherent dialogue. Consequently, accessing news is being transformed from a "cognitive labor" requiring active retrieval, multi-source comparison, and critical reading into a "knowledge Q&A" characterized by a clear goal, direct feedback, and a smooth experience. This "dialogue-as-access" model is systematically altering the initial scene and default pathway through which the public encounters news.

Following this logic, generative AI relocates and intensifies the contest for informational power-from the traditional "struggle for attention" (competing for ranking in lists) to a deeper "struggle for cognitive framing" (defining the answer to the question itself). When users habitually ask a conversational agent about the content and value of a news story, that agent's definition of news value, its selective presentation of information, and its narrative framing and interpretive angle on complex events fundamentally shape the user's cognitive structure. Therefore, the news access point provided by generative AI is not merely about the efficiency of information acquisition; it critically concerns how public issues are made visible, prioritized, and understood, and how the authority of journalism as a professional practice-derived from verification, fact-checking, editorial gatekeeping, and brand credibility-is transmitted, diluted, or transformed within this new logic of interaction.

In light of this, the core concern of this paper is: As generative AI, with its technological affordances, reconstructs the point of origin for accessing news information and shapes the emerging news-contact mode of "asking the AI," how can we theoretically conceptualize its structural position within the news ecosystem and systematically analyze how it reshapes the construction of issue salience and the flow of journalistic professional authority? To address this core question, this paper introduces "meta-intermediation" as its central analytical framework, conceptualizing generative AI as a "meta-intermediary." It is not merely a new link inserted into the existing chain of "content producer-platform distributor-user." Rather, it operates above this chain, performing secondary collection, translation, integration, and re-narration of content from a downstream multiplicity of sources (including various media outlets and platforms), packaging it into a seamless dialogic experience with itself as the interactive subject. It performs the "re-intermediation" of already-mediated information.

2. Literature Review: The Evolution of Conversational Agents and the Missing "Access" Theoretical Perspective

2.1 From "Interactive Channel" to "Access Agent": The Ascending Role of Generative AI in News Consumption

Currently, chatbots have deeply permeated the "full chain" of news, shaping a human-machine composite subject [1]. Early research on news chatbots or voice assistants largely focused on their user experience and communication effects as interactive interfaces. Studies have found that accessing news through browser-embedded AI assistants leads to the contraction and reconstruction of users' issue agendas, with salience rankings systematically differing from those in traditional news applications [2]. Furthermore, while the dialogic format shows potential for mitigating opinion polarization under specific script designs, its efficacy remains highly contingent upon underlying algorithmic recommendation logics [3]. This indicates that the

conversational agent of generative AI is far from a transparent channel; it is an active agenda-setter, evolving from a terminal form of news distribution into the initial access point for user information contact [4]. However, existing analyses predominantly remain at the level of channel or product, failing to situate this role ascension within the holistic perspective of digital news ecosystem access, thereby limiting the explanatory power regarding its structural authority.

2.2 From "Automated Generation" to "Ecosystemic Restructuring": The Deep Intervention of Generative AI in the Journalistic Field

Previous automated journalism operated based on rules and templates, essentially constituting an extension of the production process. In contrast, generative AI leverages the emergent capabilities of large language models to perform open-ended comprehension, integration, and creation [5], thereby directly intervening in the social distribution of knowledge. From this vantage point, when generative AI intervenes in the field of news distribution as a "portal," it may, beneath the surface of efficiency gains, distort the flow of value between news organizations and consumers, potentially exerting long-term pressure on the production incentives for high-quality journalism [6].

Contemporary scholars have keenly noted this ecosystemic impact, with discussions on generative AI expanding from "production boundaries" to the "restructuring of platform rules" [7]. Nevertheless, critical analysis of generative AI as foundational information infrastructure remains insufficient within academia. This indicates an urgent need for the research perspective to shift from observing technological applications to dissecting technological structures [8].

2.3 Theoretical Gap: Towards an Analytical Framework of "Meta-intermediary"

In summary, current research lacks a conceptual tool capable of accurately characterizing the unique structural tier that generative AI occupies within the news ecosystem [9]. Through a four-fold operation of "query translation-cross-source retrieval-content integration-discursive reformulation," generative AI achieves the secondary consolidation and packaging of multiple downstream platforms and sources [10]. Consequently, in its process of discursive operation, it re-negotiates, bestows, or strips the constitutive elements of cognitive authority (such as credibility, expertise, transparency) within the model, outputting a coherent knowledge package with itself as the narrative subject.

The locus of authority thus shifts from content-producing institutions towards the interactive credibility of the model itself and the weighting of platform content supply. Following this logic, generative AI integrates the full chain of "retrieval-selection-aggregation-summarization-interpretation" on top of search engines and algorithmic recommendation. Its output is a deeply re-narrated knowledge package, positioning it as an "intermediary of intermediaries"-a meta-intermediary. It redefines the ultimate interface through which information is accessed, understood, and trusted. To address this gap, this paper introduces the concept of "meta-intermediation," aiming to describe the process whereby generative AI, through its technological architecture and interaction logic, inserts itself between the user and all other information providers, becoming a new, structurally superior tier with latent controlling power within the news distribution ecosystem.

3. The Operational Logic of Generative AI's "Meta-intermediation"

3.1 Operational Mechanism: The Phased Progression of Meta-intermediation

The evolution of the news ecosystem can be interpreted as the continuous iteration of "intermediary" forms. Mediatization theory reveals how media, as an institutionalized force, reshape various social domains. Platform studies further indicate that digital platforms, through architecture design, algorithms, and protocols, have become core infrastructure organizing social connection and content flow. However, the rise of generative AI signifies the emergence of a "meta-intermediation" logic that transcends previous stages. Its core characteristic lies in the fact that it does not merely construct a distribution channel atop existing content flows. Instead, it inserts a superordinate node with overarching interpretive authority between the user and all potential information sources (including various platforms and news organizations), enabled by its deep semantic understanding and generative capabilities.

Building upon the above, the "meta-intermediary" power of generative AI is enacted through a coherent, often opaque four-stage process, the impact of which far exceeds that of traditional algorithmic filtering. The first step is Query Translation and Intent Presupposition. The system initially translates the user's natural language query into machine-executable retrieval and reasoning instructions. This process goes far beyond keyword matching, involving implicit judgments about the type of information need (e.g., fact-checking, contextual explanation, opinion synthesis), thereby presupposing the framework and agenda for the answer. The second step is Cross-Source Retrieval and Weight Allocation. The model selects sources from its accessible databases and corpora. The combination and weighting of different sources (e.g., prioritizing content from certain media outlets) systematically determine the bias and the boundaries of completeness in the output. The third step is Content Integration and Narrative Synthesis. Generative AI deconstructs, extracts, and reorganizes originally juxtaposed raw materials, synthesizing them into a new, singular narrative. While this may lead to a narrower spectrum of issues encountered by the user, it potentially increases the depth of explanation for the selected issues. The fourth step is Discursive Reformulation and Subject Usurpation. The final output of generative AI is a text where the AI serves as the narrator (using phrases like "I understand," "based on available information"). The original narrative logic, writing style, and brand identity of news organizations are diluted or even erased in this process, while the AI itself becomes the "foreground subject" of the discourse, accomplishing a symbolic substitution of the information sources.

3.2 Authority Reconstruction: The Rise of Model Authority and the Cognitive Obscuration Effect

Through the aforementioned four-fold mechanism, generative AI positions itself as the meta-intermediary of news information flows. This process not only alters the pathways of information distribution but also deeply deconstructs and reconstructs the foundations of the professional authority upon which journalism stands. Traditional journalistic authority is an institutional, cumulative "institutional authority," built upon rigorous editorial norms, organizational reputation, journalists' professional identity, and historically formed public trust. In the platform era, distribution systems centered on algorithms have gained significant "platform authority," derived from the structural monopoly over user attention channels and the power to set visibility rules [11]. However, the meta-intermediation of generative AI fosters and foregrounds a more disruptive form of authority-" model authority." This is a type of cognitive authority instantly generated during the human-computer interaction process. Its source of power is not based on long-term accumulation of social trust or physical control over channels, but is rooted in a unique persuasiveness shaped by the following technological affordances.

Firstly, generative AI communicates in natural language, employing personalized expressions such as "I understand," "I think," "I suggest," and exhibits an omniscient breadth of knowledge. This parasocial interaction easily leads users to project it as a rational, neutral, and omnipotent medium for news access, fostering emotional and cognitive trust. This sense of trust constitutes the affective foundation of model authority. Secondly, in its discursive output, generative AI typically presents text with coherent logic and an affirmative tone, rarely displaying internal hesitation or uncertainty. This confident narrative style is easily interpreted as "objective," "comprehensive," and "accurate [12]," thereby gaining user trust under the guise of a "technical objectivity." In contrast, responsible journalism often includes source attribution, balancing of multiple perspectives, and acknowledgment of uncertainties. This necessary complexity may, in the face of the model's smooth output, lose some of its "aura of authority." Thirdly, generative AI undertakes the entire cognitive labor of cross-source information retrieval, comparison, integration, and summarization, providing users with an easily digestible conclusion. This "cognitive outsourcing" allows users to gain convenience and eliminate cognitive burden while simultaneously ceding their right to verify information and exercise comprehensive judgment. Viewed from this angle, user acceptance of news content produced by generative AI is partly based on trust in the model's "processing capability," and the model, by virtue of this efficient technical performance, consolidates its own position of model authority.

Consequently, during interaction with generative AI, model authority, by virtue of its immediacy, interactivity, and anthropomorphic traits, occupies the foreground of user cognition. In contrast, the institutional authority of source providers and the platform authority of channel bases are pushed to varying degrees into the background or are deeply embedded within the model's narrative. This leads to an obscuration effect regarding authority, meaning the user's ultimate trust decision may be more directly anchored to the

fluency of the conversational experience and the perceived reliability of the model's persona, rather than being traced back to the professional credibility of the original news organization. Operating within this dynamic structure, the traditional linear authority transmission model of "production-distribution-reception" is replaced by a triangular circuit of "institutional production (authority source) - platform integration and supply (authority channel) - model translation and personalized presentation (authority foreground)." The professional value of news is created at the front end of the chain but faces the risk of being redefined or even overridden by model authority at the chain's terminus.

3.3 Ecosystemic Shaping: The Impact of Meta-intermediation on the News Ecosystem

Through reshaping the origin point of information contact, the "meta-intermediation" of generative AI in the journalistic field exerts profound, structural impacts on core pillars of the news ecosystem: the plurality of public agendas, the value realization of news organizations, and the ethics of accountability in information dissemination.

The first is the erosion of publicness. Traditional agenda-setting theory assumes that media influence public cognition through reporting frequency and salience, yet the public still faces a diverse menu of issues. Search engine results pages, to an extent, preserve this menu-like, traceable competitive form. However, the meta-intermediation of generative AI introduces a more monopolistic mechanism of "agenda circuit-breaking." Under this mechanism, generative AI typically provides only one so-called optimal answer to a specific query. Consequently, the spectrum of public issues is narrowed in this process, as issues not selected and integrated into the answer by the model become effectively invisible to the user. Interpretive frameworks are also pre-configured; complex debates about an issue are compressed and reconciled into a seemingly objective summary, where diverse viewpoints and conflicting facts may be dissolved within the model's smooth output. Furthermore, agenda competition increasingly becomes opaque. The logic behind which issues are selected, marginalized, or excluded is hidden within the model's black box [13], far less scrutinisable than traditional editorial decisions or social media algorithms. Therefore, while generative AI creates a highly personalized news reality, it simultaneously generates a highly monopolistic "interpretive reality," thereby weakening the shared basis of societal issues.

The second is economic deconstruction. When news is consumed via generative AI, the producer's brand identity is significantly marginalized, precipitating a crisis of "white-labeling" for journalism. News content is packaged and distributed by generative AI like unbranded generic goods, stripping away its intrinsic brand value, editorial stance, and trust relationships. Consequently, if users become accustomed to obtaining free summaries via generative AI, their motivation to visit the original website, develop brand loyalty, and ultimately pay for content may sharply decline. The core assets of news organizations-their credibility and brand relationships-risk being "pipelined." They continue to bear high costs for original reporting but may fail to secure a corresponding share in user perception and commercial return. This is not merely a battle for traffic; it is a struggle for the right to define the meaning and value upon which journalism depends for its survival.

The third is the ethical dilemma. Generative AI pre-completes the cognitive labor of comparison, verification, and synthesis, delivering users a pre-processed conclusion. In this context, when information contains errors or bias, where does accountability lie? Is it with the source news for factual inaccuracy? With the model for distorting the original meaning during integration? With the algorithm for bias in source selection? Or with the user for improper query phrasing? This blurring and elongation of the chain of accountability renders traditional mechanisms based on clear attribution ineffective. It may cause news organizations providing the original material to shoulder blame for the generative AI's errors, while also allowing generative AI to evade responsibility by citing "technological neutrality" or "third-party sourced content." Ultimately, this can lead to the hollowing out of public information accountability.

4. Towards Collaborative Governance: Regulatory Pathways and Agent Strategies for the Meta-intermediated News Ecosystem

The structural impact of generative conversational AI's "meta-intermediation" on the news ecosystem calls for a systemic governance response commensurate with its scale. Such governance cannot remain at the level of regulating a singular technology or content. Instead, it must confront the essence of the "meta-intermediary" as a new type of power node, constructing a multidimensional collaborative framework encompassing

technological platforms, news organizations, and public regulation. This aims to harness the unchecked "power over meaning," ensuring that this potent technological architecture enhances societal information efficacy without undermining the plurality of the public sphere, the autonomy of journalism, and the shared foundation of factual cognition.

4.1 Constructing an "Auditable Chain of Meaning Generation"

The core logic of governance must shift from "output correction" to upfront "process transparency," counterbalancing the cognitive power of the meta-intermediary by constructing an "auditable chain of meaning generation." The power opacity of the meta-intermediary is rooted in its opaque translation process between input (multi-source information) and output (a dialogue). Therefore, breaking this black box cannot rely solely on fact-checking the final answer; it must compel the revelation of the internal cognitive processing chain. This requires establishing a systematic source influence disclosure regime. When a generative AI responds to news queries, it should automatically generate and make accessible to users a dynamic cognitive provenance report. This report must list, in a readable format, the core sources relied upon for the answer and their relative weighting, and identify key nodes of information integration and inference. Based on this, for issues with significant controversy, the system should be able to reveal the distribution profile of sources representing different stances within its training data or real-time retrieval results.

This "process transparency" should partially restore users from the position of passive recipients of conclusions to the role of "deliberators" who can scrutinize the argumentation process. Simultaneously, it provides an interface for external audit: researchers and regulators can leverage computational analysis on large volumes of cognitive provenance reports to continuously map the source networks and narrative patterns of different meta-intermediaries, thereby systemically assessing whether they harbor structural biases or covert agenda-setting.

4.2 Anchoring Journalistic Value and Clarifying Accountability Boundaries

The architectural design of governance needs to transition from single-actor accountability to multi-actor responsibility allocation, employing innovative institutional tools to re-anchor journalistic value and clarify accountability boundaries, thereby repairing the ecological balance distorted by meta-intermediation. The "white-labeling" crisis triggered by meta-intermediation is fundamentally a failure of incentive and accountability mechanisms at the ecosystem level. Therefore, governance must provide new institutional tools for ecosystem-level rebalancing.

In the economic dimension, it is imperative to promote the establishment of copyright and compensation mechanisms based on fine-grained value measurement. Current "one-size-fits-all" content licensing agreements fail to differentiate between the social value and production costs of an investigative report versus a news brief. Future cooperation frameworks should explore the introduction of technical solutions, such as blockchain-based content fingerprinting and usage tracking. These could record the extent and manner of use (e.g., direct summarization, factual citation, contextual integration) of specific news content fragments within AI-generated answers, as well as subsequent user interactions they elicit (e.g., clicks to the original article). Building upon this, a fairer "micro-value" circulation system should be established, enabling high-quality original content to receive commensurate compensation based on its actual contribution when accessed by AI. This would economically incentivize in-depth news production and curb the ecosystem's "tragedy of the commons."

In the accountability dimension, it is essential to design a tiered, traceable joint accountability framework to penetrate the "accountability fog." When AI-generated information causes public harm, liability determination should follow a traceable chain: first, examining whether the AI platform fulfilled its "process transparency" obligations and exercised reasonable moderation duties; second, tracing back to the news organization that provided the erroneous key source; while also considering whether the user engaged in malicious prompting. Regulators could draw inspiration from the "defect identification" principle in product liability, establishing "cognitive defect" standards for AI-generated content (e.g., omission of key facts, extreme imbalance in source representation, failure to flag known biases). Responsibility would then be apportioned based on the degree of fault each party contributed to the defect. This requires platforms, media, and developers to jointly invest resources in building shared infrastructure and industry standards for fact-

checking and bias detection, transforming the vague fear of liability into cooperative momentum for collectively improving system reliability.

4.3 Empowering News Organizations to Become Dominant Interpreters

The agent strategy of governance should incentivize a shift from "passive adaptation" to "active construction," empowering news organizations to become dominant interpreters, thereby rebuilding pluralistic nodes of authority within the meta-intermediated ecosystem. Confronted with the "super foreground" constructed by platform media through technological advantage, if mainstream media merely cling to the role of content supplier, they will inevitably be "pipelined." In view of this, another crucial dimension of governance is to empower news organizations, through policy guidance and resource allocation, to transform into "intelligent media agents"-actors who deeply integrate AI technology, harness professional editorial wisdom to steer human-AI collaboration, and directly provide the public with advanced cognitive services. This requires moving beyond simplistic approaches like building media brains or chatbots, towards supporting the development of domain-augmented AI systems.

For instance, supporting mainstream media in developing specialized models or enhancement plugins for vertical public domains (e.g., policy analysis, science communication, local governance), deeply integrating their proprietary databases, editorial knowledge graphs, and fact-checking capabilities. These systems could offer not just information, but contextualized interpretation, credibility assessment, and historical 脉络梳理 based on long-term professional accumulation, thereby creating differentiated value against the shallow synthesis of general-purpose large language models. The state could offer preferential support for such explorations in areas like research grants, data access, and computing resources, encouraging the formation of a cohort of authoritative, credible "domain-knowledge meta-intermediaries" backed by professional media brands. Furthermore, media should be encouraged to explore new modes of transparent narration-actively and visually revealing the information processing journey, multi-source comparisons, and uncertainties within their news reporting and generative AI interactions, making the logic of professional judgment itself part of the content product. This active construction aims to reclaim the interpretive authority blurred by general-purpose models, re-embedding nodes of authority based on journalistic professionalism at the cognitive level. The goal is to steer the meta-intermediated ecosystem away from potential monopoly towards a healthy landscape where diverse agents compete and complement each other based on different authoritative foundations.

5. Conclusion: Reasserting the Structural Role of Journalism in the Age of Meta-intermediation

The shift from the "search box" to the "dialog box" signifies far more than an innovation in interaction methods; it marks a profound restructuring of power within the digital news ecosystem. When generative AI becomes the "meta-intermediary" of journalistic authority, a fundamental question at the epistemological level emerges: where, ultimately, will the credibility of public knowledge in the age of intelligent communication be anchored-in time-tested professional institutions and norms, or in the highly realistic yet opaque conversational experiences instantly generated by algorithms with each interaction?

Consequently, for journalism studies and practice, the most pressing question has transformed. We should no longer dwell on the substitutive anxiety of "whether AI will replace journalists," but must confront a more structural inquiry: in an era where "meta-intermediaries" dominate information access points, how are journalistic professionalism and the publicness it carries to be re-situated within the depths of technological architectures, market logics, and cognitive habits?

This necessitates that journalism achieves a strategic cognitive ascension from "content supplier" to "defender of meaning sovereignty," as discussed earlier. Its core task is to proactively employ intelligent technologies to innovate the form and interactive interfaces of public information products, constructing indispensable nodal authority within the meta-intermediated ecosystem. Simultaneously, society must prudently temper the power of meta-intermediaries through institutionalized transparency requirements, audit supervision, and value compensation mechanisms, ensuring that technological evolution remains compatible with the informational plurality, rational debate, and foundational accountability essential to democratic societies. Only by placing the theoretical issue of meta-intermediation at the center of theoretical insight and institutional design can journalism re-anchor its unshakable structural position in shaping the public sphere

and sustaining the social cognitive foundation amidst the intelligent wave. This is not merely a response to technology; it is a renewed commitment to, and a creative reconstruction of, the public essence of journalism.

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