THE AI ISSUES TRAP
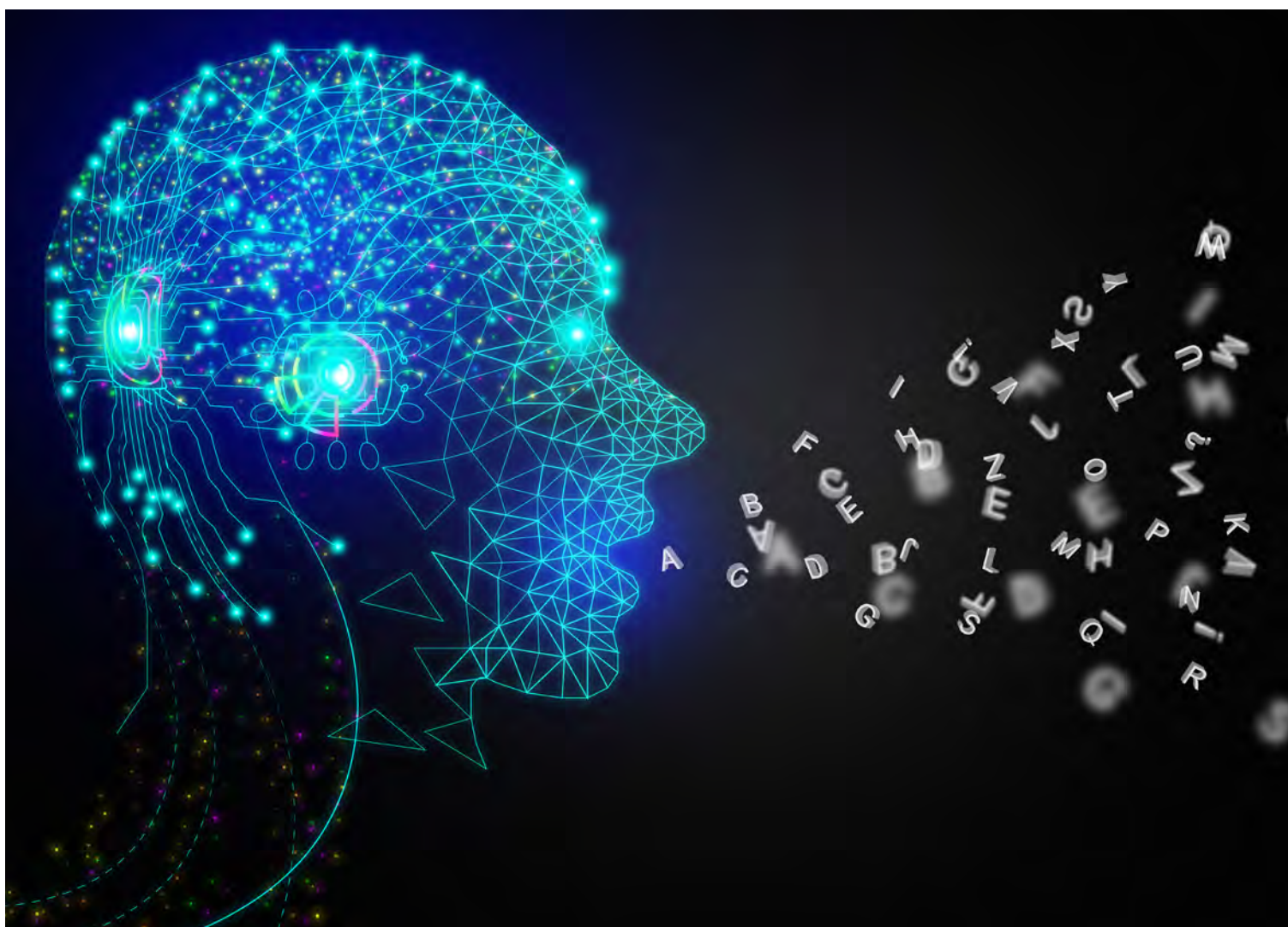
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Introduction

AI is increasingly shaping how people access, distribute and consume information, and is adding fuel to the fire of fake news and misinformation. This represents a real challenge for crisis and issues practitioners, with AI-generated news creating a newfound permanence for issues and cementing misinformation.

In a survey of 200 communications professionals, commissioned by Golin as part of The AI Issues Trap report, we found that while 96% of communications practitioners recognise the threat of AI to an organisation or brand's reputation, with one-quarter identifying it as a significant threat, over 60% feel unprepared and are yet to adjust their approach.

In this report

Golin London analyses the current extent of AI challenges in managing issues and crisis, outlining the reputational implications of AI-generated news and the operational shift required to manage crisis and issues in an AI-fuelled media landscape.

Vic Brophy
Executive Director,
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The shift in consumer media consumption

To understand the threat, we need to start by looking at the current and future newsroom, the way content travels and where issues can now arise from.

While newspapers and magazines are held to the IPSO code, the National Union of Journalists has ethics codes, broadcasters must uphold Ofcom's Broadcasting Code, there is very little, if any, regulation of social media, influencers, websites and blogs, even more so as you step outside of UK jurisdiction.

Younger adults are most likely to use social media for news; older adults use more traditional sources

Figure 2 shows that online news sources are popular among the younger end of the age spectrum, used by 83% of 16–24-year-olds. This is driven by social media, used by 71% of this age group for news. Broadcast TV is used by under half (47%) of this age group compared to the vast majority of people over 65.

Figure 2 also shows that reach of broadcast television and print newspapers is extended by additional online consumption through BVoD services and newspaper websites and apps, particularly among those aged 25-34 and 35-44 years old.

Figure 2: Use of main platforms for news nowadays, by age
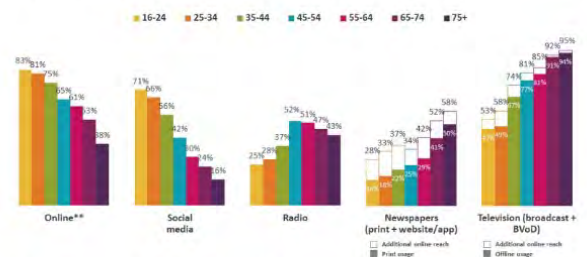
Ofcom News Consumption Survey 2023. Question: C1. Which of the following platforms do you use for news nowadays?

With just under half (47%) of UK adults using social media for news and TikTok growing in popularity as a news source (reaching 10% of UK adults, an increase from 1% in 2020),[1] where people consume news is of critical importance in understanding the AI Issues Trap. Ultimately, where issues manifest has changed.

The proliferation of fake news is not 'new news', but when considered with the increasing use of unreliable news sources on social media and generative AI, it takes on a whole new terrifying force. Falsehoods and distortions of reality are easier to create with AI and can spread like wildfire on social media. As part of the report, we identified 16% of a recent conversation about one multi-national that mentioned 'China' originated from fake accounts.

The rapid growth of AI

The rapid growth of AI is increasingly shaping how people access and consume information, with over 50% of US mobile users now using AI-powered voice searches every day, and ChatGPT gained 100 million users in just 2 months after its launch.

https://www.
ofcom.org.uk/__
data/assets/pdf_

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The dangers of AI in managing issues

AI is being used to generate news, is being used as a search function and is being used to create as well as amplify fake news—we're caught in an AI Issues News Trap.

Generative AI tools for search are flawed

Even if AI is just used for simple research tasks by newsrooms, the public or competitors, tools like ChatGPT are not always trustworthy. While it can usually answer general knowledge questions accurately, it may give misleading answers on more specialised topics. ChatGPT is an AI language model that was trained on a large body of text from various sources (e.g., Wikipedia, books, news articles, scientific journals), so its answers are based on patterns that it saw in the training data. Some ChatGPT users report that the AI model with GPT-4 has access to current information until September 2023, while other users still encounter older training data.

AI-written news is increasing rapidly...

Looking to the future newsroom, David Caswell, from The Reuters Institute at Oxford University and author of *AI and Journalism: What's Next*, said 'It is likely that, at least for some categories of news, news organisations will focus less on producing individual stories by hand and more on overseeing systems and processes that produce or help produce stories'. Further, NewsGuard has identified 49 news and information sites that appear to be almost entirely written by AI software. A new generation of increasingly credible content farms are on the way.

...And lacks human interpretation

Good writers don't just list facts: they interpret them, make decisions about which ones are important and provide relevant context. There are dangers that automated news will lack such context, reproduce bias and mislead readers. Arvind Narayanan, a computer science professor at Princeton, asked ChatGPT some basic questions about information security, and the chatbot responded with answers that sounded plausible but were actually nonsense. 'The danger is that you can't tell when it's wrong unless you already know the answer.'

AI can fuel misinformation and disinformation

AI tools are also putting the ability to create disinformation into the hands of many, not just the few. Disinformation campaigns deliberately attempt to create and spread falsehoods or distortions, and many fall in the trap of participating in disinformation campaigns by sharing false or misleading content that looks genuine and credible.

Fuelling distrust of all types of news

When the quality of the deepfakes becomes so convincing, it's hard to know what to trust. While this may seem extreme, when deepfakes are infiltrating the news, the idea of trust in media outlets begins to fall apart. Perhaps the biggest indication that deepfakes could become part of everyday mainstream media came late last year when the Korean television channel MBN presented viewers with a deepfake of its own news anchor, Kim Joo-Ha. The creator, DeepBrain AI (formerly known as Moneybrain), has said that it's looking for media buyers in China and the US.[2]

https://www. creativebloq. com/features/ deepfake- examples

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Understanding the stories or narratives that will dominate your permanent record.

Golin has developed a new methodlogy, which uses data points across volume of mentions, types of actors, length of sustained media conversation and more, to assess what to look for when an issue emerges and how it might feature in the permanent record. The analysis includes timeline dissection, identifying key inflection points, identification of key voices that accelerated the issue and qualitative assessment of external factors that played a role in the crisis.

Golin found that four key factors provided the critical elements that made stories dominate the news agenda across traditional and social media:

Key determinants of virality

Newness

This may seem obvious, but a number of issues, particularly around misinformation, tend to resurface or circle back, so the freshness of the story is critical to its acceleration.

Leadership

If the organisation in question is a leader or laggard on the subject matter, that will likely drive attention. Those who seem to run with the crowd do just that, fade into the ether. This leadership (or lack of) position helps to underscore the shock factor and drive virality.

Key determinants of longevity

Active micro-communities

Typically, issues practitioners don't fan the flames from a vocal minority, but our assessment found that by not challenging the content from those micro-communities, the issue continues to prevail, driving longevity.

Media divisiveness

With media outlets much more overt in their editorial stance, the bias they have in a story is adding force majeure to the longevity of an issue.

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Applying the methodology to real-life issues

When we applied our methodology to nine issues in the last year, we saw those with a high level of these accelerators made an issue travel, with Bud Light's Dylan Mulvaney partnership hitting on all four accelerators.

The promotion addressed a culturally sensitive topic, one that is already a source of controversy, and the partnership had little time to breathe before it was weaponised by the right-wing media and influencers, turned negative - outranking more balanced views in terms of visibility. Anheuser-Busch released

a statement two weeks into the crisis, which didn't directly reference Mulvaney or defend the reasoning behind the partnership.

The importance

This crisis event illustrates why careful planning and validating potential audience response is important when presenting new, challenging perspectives. The partnership lingered longer in the news and continues to resonate as a case study in brand comms failure.

Today's Issues Accelerators

Brand Crisis	Newness	Leadership	Active Micro-Community	Media Divisiveness	Volume	Engagement	Longevity
BudL ight: Dylan Mulvaney Partnership	✅	✅	✅	✅	**HIGH**	**HIGH**	**HIGH**
BrewDog: 2022 Qatar World Cup Campaign			⊖	✅	LOW	LOW	LOW
ITV: Phillip Schofield Affair	✅	✅		✅	**HIGH**	**HIGH**	MED
Home Bargains Recall					LOW	LOW	LOW
Morrison's Site Closure		✅			LOW	LOW	LOW
Esprit Profit Warning					LOW	LOW	LOW
Wetherspoon's Employee Issue		⊖			LOW	LOW	LOW

✅ = Fullym eets criteria   ⊖ = Partiallym eets criteria

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How to navigate the landscape and protect reputation

As a young, fresh-faced practitioner, that adage of 'It's not the mistake that matters; it's how you deal with it' was the bedrock of issues and crisis management.

Previously, you might consider how to use SEO strategy to mitigate negative reputational incidents, quick edits or corrections to stories online to set the record straight. But these traditional tools of course-correction are over, as AI trawls for instances of facts that have happened, regardless of the corrections, the context or misleading narratives.

AI is already driving mis- and disinformation into newfound permanence—creating a false permanent record—so we can't work in the way issues practitioners have worked in the past.

In an AI-fuelled world, it's increasingly clear that we must adapt our processes to focus on upholding the truthful narrative.

01 It's less about spiking a print story and more about finding the source of the wider story to course-correct

02 Ignoring extreme voices allows for an incorrect narrative to fester online; we need to tackle falsehoods

03 Reactive statements won't reach all audiences; we need to think multichannel and go where our audience is, not where our contact book is

04 Reacting to a journalist enquiry is too little too late; this issue might already be swirling online

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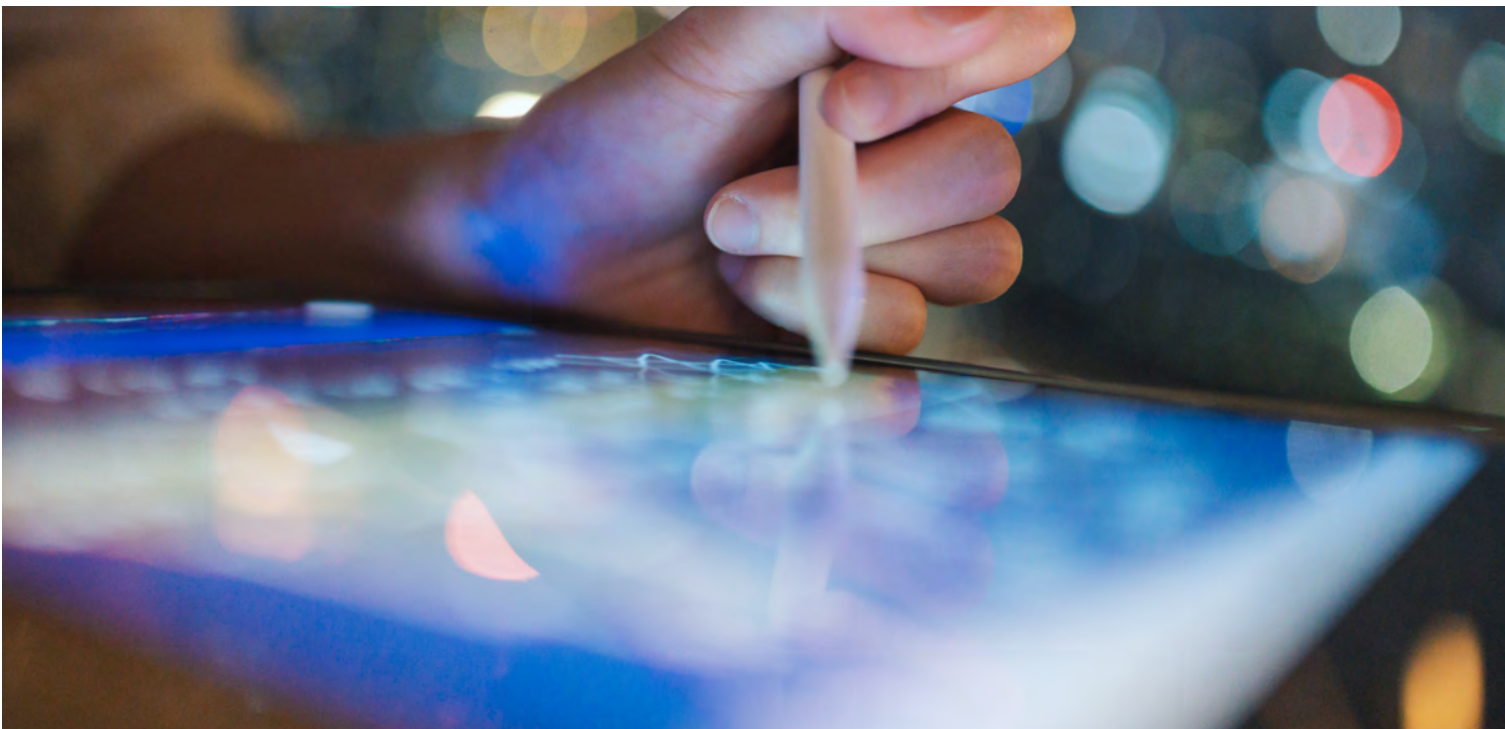
How to avoid the AI Issues Trap

By asking the below questions, practitioners should be able to prepare and act fast.

Where is our core audience?

Practitioners should consider exactly who an issue may impact and where they digest information versus thinking traditional media first. Simply responding to those who reach out for comment or issuing a statement isn't enough in an AI-fuelled world. Responses need to be considered for multiple channels. Are they appropriate for TikTok? Is it using language that some of our consumers are using? This is especially important when we couple AI search with the tide of disinformation echoing through the corners of TikTok, and Gen Z's passive attitude towards traditional news media consumption—the only place where journalists have a duty to correct misinformation.

What is the reputational goal?

If spiking the media article is no longer the holy grail, what is the goal that issues practitioners hope to achieve? While teams have shifted to social listening, responding to customer complaints or long-term campaigns to 'set the record straight', defining the end goal is critical yet often overlooked, particularly when handling a live issue. If keeping something quiet isn't an option, setting a clear reputational goal will help shape the course through the AI minefield.

What will the organisation's 'permanent record' look like?

Keeping this question in mind at all times will help internal decision-makers understand the impact of their choices. As generative AI develops poor decision-making, ill-thought-out communications and leaving false narratives to exist in a vacuum could blight an organisation or brand's permanent record in perpetuity. It's vital to consider what that permanent record looks like and act to address what might be included.

Who is driving a story or narrative that is impacting your permanent record?

If you hope to change the tide of this information during a live crisis, it is critical to target the source of the acceleration rather than simply reacting to it. In this way, AI-infused tools can help by predicting whether an issue will accelerate or by helping identify the most influential or accelerating piece of content.

Can you identify mis- and disinformation?

Organisations will need to defend themselves from tomorrow's attacks. That means exposing and reporting malicious actors, disinformation and bot networks. There is technology designed to detect social media manipulation, identify key opinion leaders and expose inauthentic sources that spread misinformation or disinformation about brands or products.

As a first port of call, practitioners need to ascertain if content with misinformation was created and propagated by bad actors. In such cases, taking an active role is exactly the wrong thing to do, as it can move the content to trusted sources. Golin has a cutting-edge solution that leverages AI to detect inauthentic and malicious profiles on social media, generative text [Gen-Text] and generated images, videos and deep fakes.

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Conclusion

Entering the age of preparedness

We've moved from tidying up a mess to pre-empting and preventing a stain on the permanent record. This shift is not to be underestimated. 'Failing to prepare is preparing to fail' has never felt more accurate. Crisis comms professionals must walk into every scenario thinking about how we will ensure our clients' point of view, actions and reactions are baked into the permanent record alongside any of our detractors.

Ultimately, this leads us to preparedness being the most important step in the crisis and issues playbook. More than ever, practitioners need to establish the truth, understand their audience and channel planning like never before and, crucially, set the record straight—managing the detractors no matter how extreme they may be.

If you would like to learn more about our findings or about Golin's local and global Issues and Crisis practice, please email Laura Weston Lweston@golin.com or Victoria Brophy Vbrophy@golin.com

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