



Literature Review

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Public Trust and Legitimacy in the AI Era: A Systematic Review of Public Media Organizations

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ABSTRACT

As artificial intelligence (AI) becomes increasingly embedded in public media operations, questions surrounding legitimacy, trust, and ethical governance have moved to the forefront of scholarly and institutional debate. This study presents a systematic literature review of 88 peer-reviewed articles published between 2000 and 2026, examining how public media organizations address the opportunities and challenges posed by AI adoption. Using thematic synthesis and VOSviewer co-occurrence analysis, the review identifies three core themes: sustaining institutional legitimacy, safeguarding public trust, and addressing ethical and societal challenges. Findings reveal that transparency, adherence to professional norms, accountability structures, and audience engagement function as critical mechanisms for navigating AI-driven transformations. While AI offers clear benefits for efficiency, personalization, and content innovation, its adoption also introduces risks related to bias, opacity, editorial integrity, and public accountability. Theoretically, this study contributes by integrating fragmented scholarship on legitimacy, trust, and AI governance and by proposing a clearer conceptual understanding of how public media organizations can maintain legitimacy and public trust in AI-mediated environments. The review also highlights governance approaches that align technological innovation with public-service values. Implications for policy, management, and future research are discussed, emphasizing the need for adaptive regulatory frameworks, participatory engagement strategies, and continuous assessment of emerging AI technologies.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) is transforming the media landscape, profoundly affecting how public media organizations produce, curate, and distribute content. AI technologies, including automated journalism, algorithmic news recommendation, and content personalization, offer unprecedented opportunities for efficiency, reach, and audience engagement (Dodds et al., 2025; Peña-Alonso et al., 2025). At the same time, these technologies introduce significant challenges related to

transparency, accountability, bias, and editorial integrity (Zhu et al., 2025; Gilardi et al., 2024). For public media organizations, which operate under mandates to serve the public interest and uphold democratic values, these challenges directly affect their legitimacy and the trust audiences place in them (de-Lima-Santos et al., 2025).

Legitimacy, defined as the socially recognized right of an organization to operate and exert influence, is central to the authority and credibility of public media institutions (Suchman, 1995; Bourdieu, 1998). In the AI

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era, legitimacy extends beyond adherence to professional norms and regulatory frameworks; it increasingly depends on audiences' perceptions of ethical and transparent AI use (Peña-Alonso et al., 2025; Dodds et al., 2025). Public trust, closely linked to legitimacy, reflects the confidence audiences have in the reliability, impartiality, and societal value of media outputs (Napoli, 2011; Gilardi et al., 2024). Trust is particularly sensitive in AI-mediated environments, where opaque algorithms and automated processes can undermine public confidence, even if journalistic standards are maintained (Henestrosa et al., 2023; Gilardi et al., 2024).

Despite the growing adoption of AI in public media, theoretical understanding of how AI influences legitimacy and public trust remains limited (de-Lima-Santos et al., 2025; Dodds et al., 2025). Most research to date has focused on technical aspects of AI deployment, algorithmic accuracy, or audience engagement metrics, leaving a gap in conceptual frameworks that explain the societal and organizational implications of AI integration (Gutiérrez-Caneda et al., 2024; Drexler et al., 2019; Dörr, 2016). In particular, there is a lack of systematic synthesis that integrates insights from media studies, organizational legitimacy theory, and AI governance to explain how public media organizations can sustain legitimacy and public trust in AI-mediated environments. Addressing this gap is critical for public media organizations seeking to navigate the AI-driven transformation of the media ecosystem without compromising their democratic mandate or normative responsibilities.

This paper offers a theoretical exploration of legitimacy and public trust in the context of AI. Drawing on insights from media studies, organizational theory, and AI ethics (Suchman, 1995; Napoli, 2011; Gilardi et al., 2024), it examines how public media organizations can maintain legitimacy, cultivate trust, and respond to ethical and societal challenges introduced by AI. Through a systematic literature review, the analysis synthesizes existing scholarship to clarify the relationship between AI adoption, institutional legitimacy, and public trust in public media contexts. By integrating these interdisciplinary perspectives, the paper contributes a conceptual framework to guide public media organizations in balancing technological innovation with their normative and societal obligations. This contribution highlights the study's novelty by consolidating fragmented research and offering an integrated theoretical perspective on responsible AI governance in public media. In doing so, the article provides both theoretical insights and practical implications for sustaining the credibility and social value of public media in the AI era.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The accelerated integration of artificial intelligence into media ecosystems requires a clear understanding of the

underlying concepts that shape current debates about the future of public media. Four concepts, legitimacy, public trust, artificial intelligence and its broader sociotechnical context, and the distinctive nature of public media organizations, form the conceptual foundation of this study. Rather than treating these concepts independently, this section highlights how they interact to shape the governance and societal role of AI in public media. This section introduces these concepts to provide a shared analytical framework for the subsequent discussion.

Legitimacy is a central concept in both organizational studies and journalism research. It refers to the socially constructed perception that an institution's actions, norms, and roles are appropriate and aligned with broader societal expectations (Suddaby, Bitektine & Haack, 2017; Suchman, 1995). Classic definitions highlight legitimacy as a generalized belief that an organization has the right to exist and operate within a given social system (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). In journalism, legitimacy has historically been grounded in professional norms such as accuracy, impartiality, independence, and truth-seeking (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014; Schudson, 2001). These norms distinguish journalism from other forms of communication and justify its institutional role in democratic societies (McQuail, 2010). For public media organizations, legitimacy is additionally tied to their public service mandate, statutory responsibilities, and commitment to providing universal, diverse, and high-quality information (van den Bulck & Moe, 2018; Lowe & Martin, 2014). In this sense, legitimacy is both normative, reflecting ideals about what journalism should be, and empirical, depending on whether audiences and stakeholders actually perceive media institutions as credible and socially valuable (Napoli, 2011). In AI-mediated media environments, legitimacy increasingly depends on how technological systems are designed, governed, and aligned with these normative expectations.

Closely related to legitimacy is the concept of public trust. While legitimacy concerns the broader societal acceptance of an institution, trust refers more specifically to the confidence individuals place in the reliability and integrity of an actor or institution (Fuglsang & Jagd, 2015). Trust in media involves several dimensions, including perceptions of accuracy, transparency, ethical conduct, and fairness (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). Public trust is especially critical for journalism because news organizations rely on audience confidence to fulfill their democratic role (Hanitzsch et al., 2018). Without trust, the ability of journalism, and particularly public media, to inform citizens, facilitate deliberation, and hold power to account becomes weakened. Moreover, trust is increasingly recognized as a dynamic and situational construct, shaped by audience experience, societal conditions, and technological changes (Strömbäck et al., 2020). In contemporary environments where misinformation

circulates widely and media systems are fragmented, trust has become more fragile (Newman et al., 2023). Understanding trust as both an individual attitude and a social resource is therefore essential for analyzing how AI may influence audience perceptions of public media. In this context, trust functions as a key mechanism through which legitimacy is maintained or challenged when new technologies such as AI are introduced.

Artificial intelligence represents another key concept in this study, not only as a set of technological tools but as an evolving sociotechnical phenomenon reshaping contemporary media practices. AI refers broadly to computational systems capable of performing tasks that typically require human intelligence, such as pattern recognition, language generation, classification, and prediction (Russell, Norvig, Popineau, Miclet & Cadet, 2021). In journalism and media environments, AI encompasses a wide range of applications: automated news writing, algorithmic recommendation systems, data-driven audience analytics, automated transcription and verification tools, and increasingly, generative models that can create images, audio, or complex narratives (Thurman et al., 2019; Dörr, 2016). However, the “AI era” extends beyond technological capabilities to include new forms of data governance, ethical challenges, regulatory frameworks, and changing audience expectations (Gillespie, 2020; Floridi & Taddeo, 2016). It is characterized by heightened concerns around algorithmic bias, transparency, explainability, accountability, and the shifting balance between automation and human editorial judgment (Helberger et al., 2020; Görgülü et al., 2019). The AI era thus signifies a structural transformation in how media content is produced, distributed, and consumed, raising important questions about how journalistic values and institutional legitimacy are maintained. These developments make AI a critical factor influencing both institutional legitimacy and the public trust that media organizations depend on.

Understanding AI in this broader sense also requires recognizing that these technologies operate as part of socio-technical systems. Algorithms are embedded in institutional routines, shaped by organizational priorities, and influenced by regulatory, cultural, and political contexts (Dourish & Bell, 2011). Their use in journalism inevitably affects professional norms and practices, raising questions not only about efficiency and innovation but also about ethics, responsibility, and governance (Lewis & Westlund, 2015). This conceptualization helps situate AI as a factor that interacts with legitimacy and trust rather than simply as a technical tool.

Finally, public media organizations constitute a distinct institutional category within the media system, and their characteristics must be clearly defined. Public media are typically mandated to serve the public interest through independent, accessible, and high-quality content

(Perlman, 2016; Jakubowicz, 2010). Their missions emphasize universality, diversity, editorial integrity, civic education, and cultural representation (Baroel & Lowe, 2007). Unlike commercial media, public media are accountable to citizens rather than shareholders, and their legitimacy is closely tied to their ability to provide impartial and inclusive information that contributes to democratic life (Justel et al., 2018; Scannell, 1996). This institutional identity shapes how public media organizations adopt and govern new technologies, including AI. Their responsibility to maintain transparency, uphold ethical journalism, and ensure inclusive and equitable access to information places them under particular scrutiny when deploying algorithmic tools (Sehl & Cornia, 2021). The intersection of public service values and AI-driven innovation therefore represents a critical area of inquiry, especially as public media navigate pressures to modernize while preserving their normative commitments.

Taken together, these concepts provide an integrated analytical lens for examining how AI adoption influences legitimacy and public trust in public media contexts. Understanding their interrelationship is essential for assessing how technological innovation can be aligned with the democratic and normative responsibilities that define public media institutions.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to examine how legitimacy, public trust, artificial intelligence, and the institutional characteristics of public media organizations are addressed in contemporary scholarly research. A systematic review is particularly appropriate given the fragmented and rapidly evolving nature of AI-related transformations in journalism and public service media. It enables a transparent and replicable process for identifying relevant academic work, synthesizing conceptual and empirical insights, and mapping areas where knowledge remains underdeveloped (Brereton et al., 2007; Snyder, 2019). The review process unfolded through a series of structured steps designed to ensure methodological rigor. The first stage involved establishing guiding analytical questions aimed at uncovering how existing literature conceptualizes legitimacy and trust in relation to journalistic practice, how AI is framed within media scholarship, and how public media organizations are discussed in the context of technological and institutional change. These questions provided the foundation for determining search parameters and defining explicit inclusion, exclusion, and quality assessment criteria for selecting relevant studies.

A comprehensive search was then conducted across major academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, Communication & Mass Media Complete, and ScienceDirect. Search strings were constructed by combining keywords and synonyms associated with the

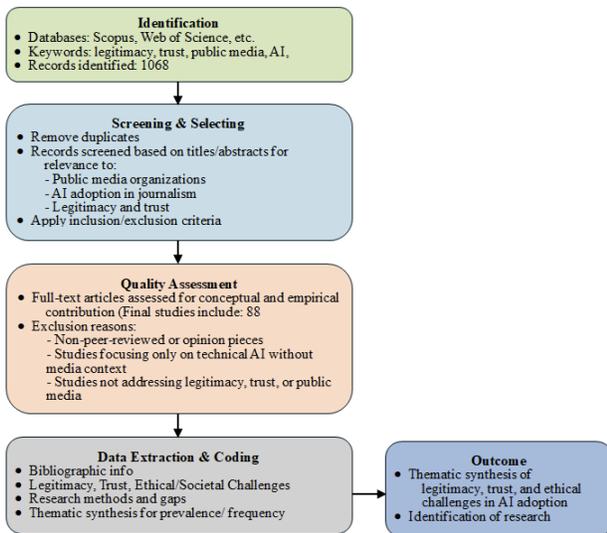


Figure 1: Key theoretical contributions of the study on trust, intimacy & public media in AI area (source: the researchers)

core concepts of the study, such as “legitimacy,” “media trust,” “public service media,” “algorithmic journalism,” “AI in newsrooms,” and “journalistic autonomy.” Searches were applied to titles, abstracts, and keywords to maximize coverage. The time span was limited to publications from 2000 onward, reflecting the period in which digital transformation and algorithmic technologies began reshaping media systems. Only peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, and authoritative institutional reports were considered. Editorials, opinion pieces, non-scholarly commentary, studies focusing exclusively on technical AI design without media context, and works outside the conceptual scope were excluded. Thus, the inclusion criteria required studies to address at least one of the core concepts of the review (legitimacy, trust, AI in journalism, or public media institutions) within a scholarly or policy-oriented context.

Following the initial search and removal of duplicates, the remaining studies underwent a two-stage screening procedure. Titles and abstracts were first reviewed for relevance to the key themes of legitimacy, trust, AI, and public media. Full-text screening was then conducted for all preliminary inclusions to verify their direct contribution to the research questions. This systematic filtering ensured that only studies offering substantive insights into the conceptual, empirical, or normative dimensions of the topic were incorporated into the final synthesis. To maintain the reliability of the review, a quality appraisal was undertaken using criteria adapted from established SLR guidelines. Each study was assessed based on the clarity of its purpose, the soundness of its methodological approach, the transparency of its analytical procedures, and the extent to which it contributed conceptual, empirical, or theoretical value. Studies that lacked methodological

transparency, clear analytical procedures, or substantive relevance to the review themes were excluded during this stage. This process reduced the risk of bias and strengthened the validity of the synthesized findings (Higgins & Green, 2011).

The analysis of the selected literature followed an integrative and interpretive approach. After extracting key information, such as definitions of concepts, theoretical frameworks, methodological approaches, and reported empirical findings, the studies were coded thematically. Patterns were identified across three overarching dimensions central to this paper: (1) how legitimacy and trust are conceptualized in journalism and public media research; (2) the roles and implications attributed to AI in content production, editorial processes, and audience relationships; and (3) how public media organizations are positioned within technological, normative, and institutional debates. By synthesizing insights across these dimensions, the review offers a consolidated understanding of how scholarship interprets the interrelations between AI-driven transformations and the legitimacy and trust dynamics surrounding public media institutions. (Figure 1) summarizes the key theoretical contributions of this study and highlights some of the factors and activities in the research area.

RESULTS

Overview of Selected Studies

The systematic literature review initially identified 1,068 publications spanning 2000–2026. Following deduplication and application of inclusion/exclusion and quality criteria, 88 studies were retained for in-depth analysis. As (Figure 2) (left) shows, research activity was minimal in the early 2000s (0–3 publications annually), with gradual growth from 2011 to 2019 (5–26 publications). A sharper expansion begins in 2020, rising from 56 publications to a peak of 406 in 2025, reflecting widespread adoption of generative AI and growing scholarly attention to transparency, accountability, and public trust. Early 2026 data (18 publications) indicate continued engagement.

Complementing the temporal trends, the geographical distribution of publications (Figure 2-right) shows concentration in several leading countries. The United States leads with 226 studies, followed by India (178), the United Kingdom (97), and China (91), reflecting their central roles in AI, media innovation, and regulation. Significant European contributions come from Spain (49), Germany (47), and Italy (38), with notable engagement from Australia (47) and Canada (38). Publications with undefined affiliations (68) and those from “Other countries” (189) highlight the increasingly global nature of research. Overall, these patterns indicate broad scholarly interest in AI’s implications for public media across diverse contexts.

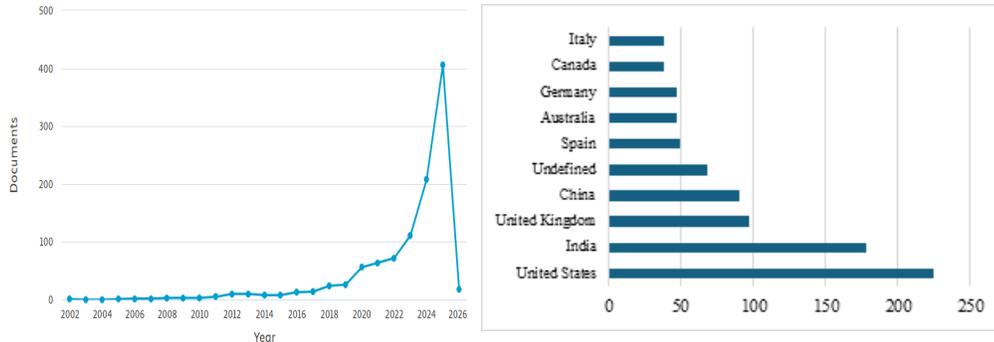


Figure 2: Temporal and geographical distribution of publications on AI and public media (2000–2026).

Analysis of document types (Figure 3-left) shows that journal articles dominate (47.1%), forming the core of peer-reviewed scholarship on AI, journalism, and public media. Conference papers (29.4%) reflect the fast-moving, exploratory nature of the field. Book chapters (8.3%), reviews (6.1%), and conference reviews (4.8%) indicate growing efforts to synthesize research, while less common formats, books (1.8%), notes (1.1%), editorials (0.6%), errata (0.7%), and letters (0.1%), demonstrate that the literature is largely composed of formal academic outputs rather than brief communications or corrections.

The distribution of publications across subject areas (Figure 3-right) highlights the interdisciplinary nature of the field. Computer science leads (28.2%), reflecting the role of algorithms, machine learning, and AI technologies in media systems. Social sciences (14.6%) emphasize media studies, communication, legitimacy, and public trust. Other contributions come from engineering (11.5%), medicine (7.3%), mathematics (6.3%), business, management, and accounting (7.4%), decision sciences (4.8%), arts and humanities (4.2%), and economics and finance (3.4%). Smaller shares include psychology (2.0%) and other fields (10.5%), showing that AI, legitimacy, and trust research spans a wide range of disciplines.

To explore the intellectual structure and conceptual relationships in the dataset, all retrieved publications underwent structured screening to ensure relevance and coherence with the core focus of this review (AI, journalism, public media, legitimacy, and trust). Non-scientific materials, duplicates, and studies using AI

solely as a technical tool without media relevance were excluded, resulting in a final dataset of 88 peer-reviewed publications for in-depth qualitative and thematic analysis. We then applied VOSviewer, a bibliometric mapping tool, to visualize co-occurrence patterns, co-citation networks, and links between keywords, authors, and publications. Nodes represent entities, with size reflecting prominence and link strength indicating connections, while clusters highlight thematic groupings.

The analysis revealed high-frequency keywords such as legitimacy, artificial intelligence, and media, showing their central role in scholarly discourse. Strong links among these nodes suggest that AI adoption, ethical considerations, and public trust are closely intertwined. Clusters delineated three main thematic areas: newsroom technology and innovation, social and ethical implications, and policy, regulation, and governance. Network density and connectivity indicate that while topics like AI adoption and generative AI are well-studied, areas such as cross-cultural differences or economic implications remain underexplored, highlighting opportunities for future research. Overall, the VOSviewer analysis complements the descriptive review by providing a visual and quantitative representation of conceptual relationships and emerging themes in AI and journalism research.

Analysis of core themes

This section presents a focused analysis of the 88 selected studies, organized around three central dimensions for public media organizations in the AI era: institutional

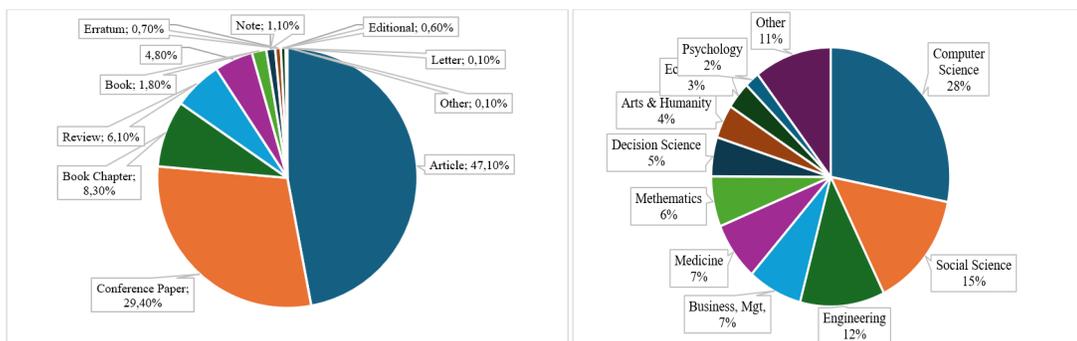


Figure 3: Distribution of publications by document type and subject area.



Table 2: Key mechanisms for building and preserving public trust in AI-mediated public media organizations

<i>Trust-Building Mechanism</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Key Actions / Features</i>	<i>Notes</i>
Transparency in AI use	48%	Clear communication to audiences about AI-generated content, explainability, bias acknowledgment	Pop-up disclaimers on AI-written stories, explaining recommendation logic, transparency dashboards
Reliability & content integrity	41%	Consistent accuracy, fairness, editorial oversight, verification of AI outputs	Fact-checking AI outputs, human verification of automated reporting, quality assurance processes
Audience engagement & responsiveness	33%	Mechanisms for feedback, correcting errors, interactive platforms, addressing misinformation	Feedback forms, audience surveys, correcting errors in AI outputs, social media Q&A

in terms of audience perceptions of reliability, fairness, transparency, and ethical conduct, emphasizing that trust is both a cognitive evaluation of media outputs and a social resource that influences engagement and legitimacy.

The literature identifies several key mechanisms through which public media organizations build and preserve trust in AI-mediated environments. Transparency in AI governance, noted in roughly 48% of studies, is considered essential for fostering confidence in AI-mediated decision-making. This includes disclosing AI use, explaining algorithmic processes, and acknowledging potential biases. Reliability & adherence to journalistic standards, emphasized in about 41% of studies, reinforces trust by ensuring that AI outputs support accuracy, impartiality, and editorial oversight. Engagement & responsiveness, reported in approximately 33% of studies, further strengthens trust, particularly when public media incorporate audience feedback, provide correction mechanisms, and interact with the public regarding AI-mediated content. These mechanisms are summarized in (Table 2), which presents the frequency of studies reporting each approach along with their key actions and features.

The literature further highlights that AI adoption can both enhance and challenge trust. Automated news generation and algorithmic recommendations may improve efficiency and personalization, but they can also create perceptions of opacity or editorial bias if audiences are not adequately informed. Generative AI content, in particular, raises concerns about authenticity and accountability, reinforcing the need for transparent communication and verification processes. VOSviewer analysis supports these patterns, showing strong co-occurrence of “trust” with keywords such as “transparency,” “ethics,” and “audience engagement. Overall, public media organizations preserve trust in the AI era by integrating transparent AI practices, maintaining rigorous journalistic standards, and actively engaging with audiences. These measures help ensure that AI adoption strengthens, rather than undermines, audience confidence and the societal legitimacy of public media.

Addressing Ethical and Societal Challenges

Ethical and societal challenges are a key concern for public media organizations adopting AI. Across the 88 selected articles, these issues are explicitly addressed in roughly 60% of the studies, highlighting the importance of responsible AI integration for maintaining public legitimacy and trust. Studies identify several recurring challenges that organizations must manage, ranging from bias and fairness to misinformation, accountability, and inclusivity.

Bias and fairness, reported in approximately 52% of studies, is a primary concern. Public media organizations are expected to mitigate algorithmic bias, ensure diverse and representative training datasets, and monitor AI outputs for fairness. Misinformation & content accuracy, highlighted in 47% of studies, requires active verification of AI-generated content, fact-checking, and the implementation of robust editorial oversight mechanisms. Accountability & transparency, discussed in 41% of studies, involves clear governance structures, explainable AI practices, and public reporting of AI use, allowing audiences to understand how algorithmic decisions are made. Finally, inclusivity & representation, appearing in about 33% of studies, emphasizes equitable access, diversity of perspectives, and inclusive content generation to reflect societal heterogeneity. These mechanisms and their frequency across the literature are summarized in (Table 3), which details the key actions and features associated with each ethical or societal challenge.

Overall, the literature suggests that addressing ethical and societal challenges requires a combination of technical, organizational, and governance strategies. Bias and misinformation mitigation, transparent practices, and inclusive policies are interrelated measures: AI adoption can enhance efficiency and personalization, but without careful oversight, it may exacerbate inequities or reduce audience confidence. VOSviewer analysis supports these findings, showing strong co-occurrence of keywords such as “ethics”, “bias”, and “accountability”, highlighting the scholarly emphasis on responsible AI deployment in public media. By actively addressing these challenges, organizations reinforce trust, sustain legitimacy, and

Table 3: Key ethical and societal challenges in AI-mediated public media organizations

<i>Ethical/Societal Challenge</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Key Actions / Features</i>	<i>Notes</i>
Bias and fairness	52%	Mitigating algorithmic bias, inclusive training data	Using diverse datasets for AI content generation, regular bias audits of recommendation algorithms
Misinformation & content accuracy	47%	Fact-checking AI outputs, verification processes	Manual review of AI-generated news, cross-checking automated content with trusted sources
Accountability & transparency	41%	Clear governance, explainable AI, public reporting	Public AI transparency reports, ethics committees reviewing AI decisions, disclosure of automated workflows
Inclusivity & representation	33%	Ensuring diverse voices, equitable access	Generating content that reflects marginalized communities, multi-language coverage, accessible AI-driven services

ensure that AI strengthens rather than undermines societal value.

Overall, the findings across the three themes indicate that public media organizations approach AI adoption through a combination of legitimacy-preserving strategies, trust-building practices, and ethical governance mechanisms. These interconnected patterns demonstrate that AI integration is not only a technological transition but also an institutional, normative, and societal process that requires deliberate oversight and value-aligned decision-making. Taken together, the results provide a foundation for interpreting how public media conceptualize and operationalize their public-service mission in the AI era. The following section, as discussion, builds on these insights, examining how the identified themes relate to existing theoretical frameworks, where gaps persist, and how public media can navigate emerging challenges as AI technologies continue to evolve.

DISCUSSION

Interpretation of the results

The findings of this review suggest that public media organizations are experiencing a transitional moment in which AI is reshaping not only production routines but also the foundational institutional relationships that define their democratic role. Although the three thematic areas, legitimacy, trust, and ethical/societal challenges, appear distinct, they collectively reveal that public media approach AI through a fundamentally value-driven rather than technology-driven logic, in contrast to commercial media and technology companies, where AI adoption is often guided primarily by efficiency, personalization, or market-oriented considerations (Gillespie, Dietz & Lockey, 2014; O’Neil, 2016). This distinction emphasizes that public media prioritize normative commitments and societal responsibilities over technological novelty, highlighting a unique pattern in the literature that has not been systematically documented in previous studies.

A key insight from the results is that legitimacy remains the organizing principle through which public media interpret AI’s implications. The high proportion of

studies addressing legitimacy (57%) indicates that AI is not perceived merely as a technical upgrade, but as a potential disruptor of organizational identity and societal mandate. This aligns with long-standing theories of public service media, which emphasize that their legitimacy derives from normative commitments, such as independence, inclusiveness, and public accountability, rather than from audience size or market performance (e.g., Túnuez-López et al., 2021; Van den Bulck & Moe, 2018). AI, therefore, becomes a test of whether these normative commitments can be maintained under automated conditions. The emphasis on transparency and editorial norms in the results suggests that public media do not blindly adopt AI but instead attempt to “domesticate” it within established professional and ethical frameworks. This supports the argument that institutions adapt technological innovation by aligning it with pre-existing values (Lewis & Westlund, 2015). At the same time, the focus on governance mechanisms (31%) reflects recognition that traditional newsroom norms alone may be insufficient for governing algorithmic processes that are less visible, more complex, and harder to audit, a concern echoed in prior studies of algorithmic accountability (Görgülü et al., 2019).

The findings concerning public trust provide a second important interpretation: trust is being renegotiated in real time as audiences attempt to make sense of AI in news production. While transparency appears again as central, the broader pattern suggests that audiences do not evaluate AI in isolation but rather interpret it through the lens of broader concerns about misinformation, institutional accountability, and media independence. This observation is consistent with previous research showing that audience trust in media is relational and contingent on perceived institutional responsibility (Strömbäck et al., 2020; Meier et al., 2022). Several studies argue that audiences want assurances that AI will enhance, not replace, human editorial judgment, a finding confirmed in our dataset through the high emphasis on reliability and professional oversight (41%). By linking this evidence to prior literature on algorithmic trust and moral agency in journalism (Gillespie, 2014; Metzger & Flanagin, 2015), the results illustrate how public media navigate AI in a

way that maintains audience confidence while respecting democratic norms.

Importantly, the results indicate that trust is neither automatically lost nor automatically gained through AI adoption. Rather, trust depends on how AI is embedded in communicative practices, editorial workflows, and accountability structures. While some prior research has emphasized the potential risks of automation for audience confidence (e.g., O'Neil, 2016), our findings show that public media can maintain or even enhance trust when AI use is accompanied by transparency, human oversight, and active public engagement. This suggests a distinction from commercial or purely technological contexts, highlighting that trust in public media is relational and socially constructed, shaped by institutional practices rather than the mere presence of AI systems.

The prominence of ethical and societal challenges in the literature (62%) underscores that AI introduces risks directly affecting public media's democratic role. Concerns about algorithmic bias, opacity, misinformation, and fairness are not just technical issues, they shape how audiences perceive the credibility, accountability, and legitimacy of public media. Public media respond with hybrid governance approaches, combining ethical guidelines, oversight structures, and human-in-the-loop processes, recognizing that relying solely on technological assurances is insufficient. This approach is critical because it allows public media to maintain societal trust and uphold their public-service mission in ways that purely technical or commercial AI implementations cannot. While prior research on responsible AI has emphasized governance in general (Cowls, King, Taddeo & Floridi, 2019; Jobin, Ienca & Vayena, 2019), our findings show that public media uniquely integrate these governance measures into institutional and editorial practices, making AI adoption a value-driven, accountable process rather than a purely technical upgrade.

Taken together, the results indicate that public media organizations are approaching AI through the lens of institutional survival and social responsibility. Rather than adopting AI solely for competitive advantage or operational efficiency, they negotiate its legitimacy in relation to democratic values, public expectations, and organizational accountability. This approach matters because it shows that AI adoption in public media is not merely a technological upgrade but a deeply institutional and ethical process, shaping how societies perceive trustworthy journalism. The themes reveal a consistent pattern: AI becomes legitimate only when embedded within transparent governance frameworks, human editorial judgment, and public-centered ethical commitments. Public media appear to follow a path of cautious, value-oriented innovation, balancing technological opportunities with normative responsibilities. Rather than resisting or

uncritically embracing AI, they develop structures that ensure automation reinforces rather than undermines their public-service mission. This positions public media as potential leaders in demonstrating responsible AI practices, offering models that may guide other media organizations and inform broader debates about the societal role of automated systems, particularly during periods of technological uncertainty and declining public trust.

Research contributions and practical implications

This study contributes to the growing body of research at the intersection of artificial intelligence, journalism, and public media by offering an integrated, empirically grounded understanding of how legitimacy, trust, and ethical governance shape AI adoption in public-service contexts. Although prior studies have examined these dimensions individually, few have mapped their interrelations systematically across a large body of peer-reviewed literature. By synthesizing insights from 88 final publications, this review identifies cross-cutting mechanisms, namely transparency, professional norms, accountability structures, reliability, audience engagement, and ethical safeguards, that collectively explain how public media organizations navigate the complexities introduced by AI.

As theoretical contributions, the study advances theoretical perspectives on institutional legitimacy in the digital era. It shows that legitimacy in AI-mediated environments depends on a combination of normative legitimacy (adherence to journalistic ethics and public-service values) and empirical legitimacy (audience perceptions of credibility and fairness). This aligns with and extends earlier work by Suchman (1995) and Meyer & Rowan (1977), illustrating how technological innovation intersects with institutional expectations. The review demonstrates that AI does not replace institutional legitimacy concerns but intensifies them, particularly in public-service media where societal accountability is structurally embedded. Also, the findings enrich theories of media trust by showing that audience confidence in AI-driven public media hinges on transparency, reliability, and responsiveness, confirming but also expanding the conceptualizations offered by Metzger & Flanagin (2015) and the broader literature on algorithmic trust (Gillespie, 2014; O'Neil, 2016). The nuanced interplay between automated decision-making and human editorial oversight identified in this review offers a more advanced model of trust dynamics in hybrid human-AI newsrooms.

In addition, the study contributes to emerging research on AI ethics and governance in media institutions by synthesizing recurring ethical issues, bias, misinformation, opacity, and lack of accountability, and demonstrating how these concerns shape institutional responses. The review integrates insights from AI ethics scholarship (Floridi & Cowls, 2019; Mittelstadt, 2019) into the media

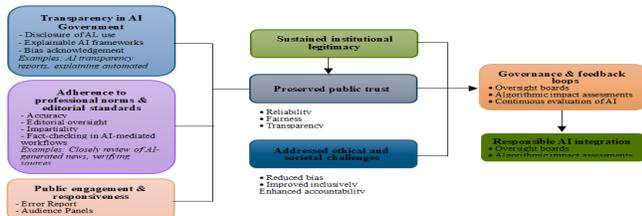


Figure 5: Responsible AI adoption framework in public media organizations

domain, showing how governance practices such as audits, explainability, and human-in-the-loop frameworks are adapted for public-service contexts.

The findings also carry several practical implications for media executives, policymakers, regulators, and journalists. First, transparency must be systematic and institutionalized rather than ad hoc. Public media organizations should develop clear communication strategies explaining how AI is integrated into content production, personalization, and editorial workflows. This includes publishing regular transparency reports, offering accessible algorithmic explanations, and embedding concise disclosures directly within user interfaces. At the same time, editorial norms must be reinforced, not relaxed, in AI-mediated environments. The results underscore the importance of hybrid newsroom models in which AI supports, but never replaces, human editorial judgment. Strengthening fact-checking procedures, accuracy verification protocols, and multi-layered quality control remains essential for preserving public-service values.

Furthermore, robust accountability structures are necessary to guide the responsible adoption of AI. Establishing independent oversight boards, conducting periodic audits, and performing algorithmic impact assessments can help mitigate risks associated with bias, misinformation, and opaque decision-making processes. These governance mechanisms ensure that ethical principles shape technological development and deployment. Public engagement also emerges as a central component of trust-building: audiences expect not only accurate and impartial content but also accessible channels for feedback, clarification, and explanation. Public media organizations should therefore invest in participatory mechanisms that allow users to question and understand AI-driven decisions. Finally, AI governance frameworks must remain dynamic. As generative AI, automation, and synthetic media continue to evolve, regulatory and organizational strategies must be updated to address emerging concerns related to authenticity, provenance, and safeguards against deceptive or fabricated content.

Through these contributions, the study provides a conceptual and practical roadmap for public media organizations seeking to responsibly integrate AI technologies while maintaining their democratic, ethical, and societal roles. To synthesize these findings and illustrate their interconnections, we propose a

conceptual model (Figure 5) that visually integrates the key mechanisms, outcomes, and governance approaches identified in this study. The model highlights how transparency, adherence to professional norms, accountability, and public engagement collectively sustain legitimacy and trust in AI-mediated public media, while also addressing ethical and societal challenges. By presenting these elements in a unified framework, the model offers both a theoretical interpretation and a practical guide for public media organizations navigating AI adoption.

Limitations and directions for future research

Although this systematic review offers a comprehensive synthesis of current scholarship on AI integration in public media organisations, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the analysis draws primarily on peer-reviewed academic sources, meaning that industry reports, internal organisational documents, and practitioner insights, while relevant, may be underrepresented. Given the rapid evolution of AI technologies and newsroom practices, valuable innovations occurring in professional settings may not yet be documented in academic literature. Second, although the review includes studies published up to 2026, academic research often lags behind real-world technological developments. AI in public media is advancing at a pace that exceeds the speed of scholarly publication cycles, meaning that emerging innovations, particularly in generative AI, synthetic content detection, and provenance technologies, may not yet be represented in peer-reviewed literature. As a result, the evidence base may not fully reflect the most recent industry practices or technological breakthroughs.

A further limitation concerns geographical representation. Despite efforts to include diverse contexts, the literature remains disproportionately centered on Europe and North America, where public service media ecosystems are well-established and heavily studied. Consequently, the findings may not fully capture conditions in regions with different regulatory environments, economic constraints, or media mandates. Methodologically, many of the reviewed studies rely on qualitative case analyses or conceptual reflections rather than empirical assessments of audience behavior, editorial performance, or technological outcomes. This limits the generalizability of the results and highlights the need for mixed-method and comparative research.

Future research should therefore prioritize cross-national empirical studies that investigate how AI systems influence trust, accountability, and audience engagement across different public media environments. There is also a clear need for longitudinal research that tracks how editorial practices, governance models, and public perceptions evolve as AI tools become more deeply integrated into organisational workflows. Additionally, scholars should explore how emerging technologies, such

as multimodal generative models, automated verification systems, and provenance-tracking infrastructures, reshape journalistic ethics and newsroom dynamics. More collaboration between academia and public media institutions would help bridge the gap between theory and practice, ensuring that scholarly insights inform real-world implementation. Finally, future research should examine the social and democratic implications of AI-driven public media, particularly in relation to inclusivity, representation, media literacy, and resilience against manipulation.

CONCLUSION

This review demonstrates that the integration of AI into public media is not simply a technological transition but a deeper institutional shift that requires renewed attention to legitimacy, trust, and governance. The evidence suggests that public media are navigating this shift by drawing on long-standing public-service values while simultaneously redefining them for an algorithmic environment. What emerges is a sector that seeks to innovate without compromising its democratic mission, a balance that is increasingly complex as AI systems become more autonomous, generative, and opaque. Rather than offering definitive answers, the existing literature reveals an evolving landscape marked by experimentation, institutional learning, and ongoing negotiation between technological possibilities and societal expectations. The challenges identified, transparency, accountability, editorial integrity, and public engagement, are not problems to be solved once, but obligations that must be sustained and recalibrated as AI advances.

From a policy and practice perspective, the findings suggest that the responsible integration of AI in public media requires institutionalized transparency mechanisms, clear governance frameworks, and sustained human editorial oversight to ensure that automation strengthens rather than undermines democratic communication. Policymakers and regulators may therefore play an important role in promoting standards for algorithmic accountability, transparency reporting, and safeguards against misinformation and bias in publicly funded media environments. For practitioners, the results highlight the importance of hybrid newsroom models in which AI supports journalistic work while preserving professional norms, editorial responsibility, and meaningful engagement with audiences. At the same time, the review identifies several priorities for future research, including cross-national empirical studies, longitudinal analyses of AI adoption in public-service media, and investigations into how emerging technologies such as generative AI and provenance systems reshape trust, governance, and journalistic practice. By integrating this policy, practical, and research perspectives, this study contributes to a broader understanding of how public media can continue

to function as democratic infrastructures within an increasingly automated information ecosystem.

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