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Ethical Risks and Normative Paths in Digital Communication in the AIGC Era

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Abstract. The rapid rise of generative artificial intelligence (AIGC) has profoundly reshaped the technical foundation and ecological structure of digital communication. From the combined perspective of communication studies and technology ethics, this paper examines four shifts that AIGC has brought to digital communication: the intelligent upgrading of content production, the multimodal expansion of representational forms, the pluralistic restructuring of production subjects, and the turn toward a precise and personalized communication logic. However, viewed along four dimensions—the erosion of authenticity, the illusion of neutrality, the loss of boundaries, and the rupture of rights and responsibilities—digital communication in the AIGC era faces serious ethical risks, including the spread of false information, algorithmic bias and value skew, data security and privacy leakage, disputes over content ownership, and the weakening of media responsibility. This study argues that a normative path combining "institutional constraint, responsibility strengthening, ethical shaping, and literacy improvement" is needed, so as to keep a dynamic balance between technological innovation and ethical order and to promote the healthy development of the digital communication ecosystem.

Keywords: AIGC, digital communication, ethical risk, algorithmic governance, media literacy

1. Introduction

ChatGPT appeared at the end of 2022, and generative artificial intelligence (AIGC) quickly moved from a technical concept to a social application. Technologies such as text-to-video, voice cloning, and digital humans have since matured, and machine-processed content is no longer limited to text but now covers images, audio, and even video. The technical foundation on which digital communication runs has therefore changed fundamentally. Communication no longer means only the transfer of information between people through media; new forms of "human-machine symbiosis and human-machine collaboration" have begun to appear. Yu Guoming and other scholars have pointed out that generative AI is driving a communication revolution and an overall restructuring of the media ecology, with effects reaching communication power, content construction, and even social thinking [1]. Yet technology is not a one-sided blessing. Although AIGC greatly improves the efficiency of content production and widens the forms of communication, it also brings ethical problems—false information, algorithmic bias, privacy exposure, and copyright disputes—that

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emerge on a large scale and often in hidden ways. The philosopher Neil Postman warned long ago, in his account of "technopoly," that when technology dominates cultural development, the excitement of efficiency may bury a society's ability to make value judgments [2]. Because digital communication mediates social cognition and the order of values, it cannot be allowed to fall into disorder. Starting from this concern, this paper takes "ethical risks and normative paths in digital communication in the AIGC era" as its research focus. It examines the digital communication enabled by AIGC and then offers a fairly complete analysis of the related ethical dangers and countermeasures, in the hope of proposing workable solutions for both governance and theory.

2. The multi-dimensional changes of digital communication in the AIGC era

AIGC is not a partial improvement of digital communication but a full-chain reconstruction that runs from production mechanisms and representational forms to subject structures and communication logic. Its changes are concentrated in the following four connected levels.

2.1. The intelligent leap in content production

Digital content production has already gone through two paradigm shifts, from professionally generated content (PGC) to user-generated content (UGC), and AIGC marks a third paradigm leap: the marginal cost of content approaches zero, and production time shrinks from hours to seconds. When large models are used to draft articles, lay out posters, or produce short videos, a first draft can be finished within seconds; machine writing, intelligent editing, and even automatic voice-over are now standard parts of media technology. In the tradition of "robot writing," the Associated Press used automation early on to produce financial news in bulk, and cases such as Xinhua News Agency's "Kuaibi Xiaoxin" and Tencent's Dreamwriter have clearly confirmed machine efficiency. The development of large models has carried this efficiency into creative fields such as commentary, screenwriting, and advertising copy. The leap in efficiency has also rearranged the human labor of the communication industry: reporters and editors no longer do simple repetitive work but turn to investigation, design, and verification, so the amount of information a media organization obtains per unit of time grows by an order of magnitude. From a theoretical angle, this change gives McLuhan's famous claim that "the medium is the extension of man" a new interpretation for the intelligent age: AIGC is a technical extension of the senses, and also of the human brain and creative ability [3]. After production efficiency rises, some basic premises of communication economics change—scarcity no longer belongs to content itself but becomes a product of attention or trust. If content can be supplied without limit, the conflict between "traffic logic" and "quality logic" quickly stands out, and this leads to the ethical problems analyzed later in this paper.

2.2. The multimodal expansion of communication forms

Digital communication under AIGC is moving from a single modality toward multimodal integration. Using text-to-image, text-to-video, or voice cloning to build digital humans and design virtual anchors means the unified use of text, image, sound, and video: content written in words can be turned into a news video at once, and a still picture can be "brought back to life" as a moving image. Since 2024, text-to-video models have made "a short film from one sentence" a reality. The China Media Group has launched a full-chain AI micro-drama, and the AI digital human anchors used by local media are also mainstream practices of multimodal generation. Peng Lan has offered a fairly complete account of media convergence, arguing that the combination of communication

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forms is not a simple adding up of channels but a fundamental adjustment of information logic and ways of reception [4]. Multimodal content greatly strengthens the immersion and persuasiveness of communication; virtual anchors broadcasting for long periods and AI avatars joining e-commerce livestreams are now basically normal. The richness of representation itself, however, leads to a flood of "simulacra." When machines can imitate every kind of sensory symbol as real, "hyperreality" in Baudrillard's sense is no longer a philosophical metaphor but a fact of life; the actual and the fictional can almost coexist technically, and the ethical problems involved thereby gain a formal basis.

2.3. The pluralistic restructuring of production subjects

Traditional communication studies took "the human" as the natural subject of communication. In the AIGC era, however, the machine has risen from a communication tool to a "quasi-subject of communication": it takes part in the whole process of topic planning, content generation, distribution decisions, and even interactive feedback, and scholars have accordingly proposed the new categories of machine-generated content (MGC) and human-machine collaborative production. At the same time, the technical threshold of content creation has been largely removed—people who cannot draw can produce pictures, and people who know nothing about editing can finish a film. "Everyone is a creator" has changed from a slogan into reality, and production subjects show an unprecedented pluralization and grassroots character. Peng Lan has noted, in discussing the challenges AI poses to the media industry, that human-machine collaboration will become the normal mode of news production, and that human value will move toward irreplaceable links such as planning, review, and value judgment [5]. The change in subject structure has two consequences. From the angle of communication democratization, plural voices about content have become common, and professional media no longer monopolize the right to speak or to produce. But the generalization of subject status also removes any fixed starting point for assigning responsibility: if a piece of false information is produced jointly by "user instruction + model generation + platform distribution," then the old ethics of "who speaks, who answers" no longer holds easily, and the clear subject foundation on which the gatekeeping system relies may be shaken.

2.4. The precision turn of communication logic

When AIGC applies recommendation algorithms to personalized communication, practice moves from "a thousand faces for a thousand people" to "a thousand faces for one person": besides giving users known information based on their profiles, the system can also construct, in real time, content suited to a person's emotions and situation. Conversational interaction now changes communication from one-to-many broadcasting into a one-to-one state of companionship, in which people and intelligent agents keep up a constantly updated, individualized communicative relationship. Yet Sunstein's warning about the "information cocoon" gains a newer technical form here: after content is filtered and even specially designed, the probability of cognitive self-enclosure—an epistemic closed loop—rises sharply instead [6]. The deeper change is this: personalized generation carries persuasive communication into the condition of "micro-manipulation." Advertising, political propaganda, or deceptive speech designed around the weaknesses of individual psychology wastes far less and persuades far more than in the age of general communication. As communication logic becomes more precise, efficiency may grow, but the ethical problems it creates must also be analyzed at the level of the individual.

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3. Ethical risks of digital communication in the AIGC era

If the changes described above tell us what AIGC "can do," ethical risk concerns "what may go wrong." In Beck's view, the risks contained in modern technology are not accidents but a necessary result of the technology's structure [7]. Following this line of thought, the ethical risks of digital communication in the AIGC period can be grouped into the four points below.

3.1. Forgery and falsehood: the erosion of communicative authenticity

The communication ethics of the AIGC era faces its most direct shock at the point of "authenticity." Using deepfake methods to manufacture another person's face or voice and to fabricate their behavior is no longer difficult; false information costs almost nothing to make, yet it is ever harder to identify. In May 2023, Mr. Guo, a company manager in Fuzhou, was deceived by AI face-swapping and voice synthesis and lost 4.3 million yuan during a ten-minute video call with a "friend." In February 2024, a finance employee of a multinational company was robbed of about 200 million Hong Kong dollars through a deepfaked "executive video conference." Before the 2024 U.S. election, some voters in New Hampshire received AI-generated robocalls imitating President Biden that discouraged them from voting—evidence that forgery has entered politics. As for content itself, the song covers of "AI Stefanie Sun," false advertisements exploiting celebrities, and AI-made images of "news scenes" are all common, and the true and the false cannot always be told apart visually. The deeper consequence of the flood of false information is the dissipation of social trust capital. Once people grow used to treating all audio-visual material with the suspicion that it "may be fake," the difficulties of the "post-truth" condition become harder to resolve, and public communication about facts begins to shake: real objects themselves may be labeled "AI-generated" and denied, producing what is called the "liar's dividend." After authenticity stops being stable, individual deception can turn into a collective cognitive disaster.

3.2. Bias and hegemony: the illusion of communicative neutrality

AIGC is generally understood as "technologically neutral," but a model's actual output is a joint reflection of its training material and the value judgments of its developers. In her book Weapons of Math Destruction, Cathy O'Neil has shown that algorithms can reproduce known social biases and then universalize and conceal them under a mathematical form of "objectivity" [8]. There are already many negative examples in reality. Amazon's AI recruiting tool long undervalued female applicants because of gender imbalance in its training data and was finally forced to shut down. COMPAS, used in the U.S. justice system to assess the likelihood of reoffending, was reported by the media to misjudge African American defendants at a notably higher rate. For generative models, the cultural assumptions inside the corpus may treat certain views as "standard answers," producing a hidden ideological output, and deviations across different cultural backgrounds deserve particular attention. The ethical core of algorithmic bias should be understood as "structural invisibility": although the bias does not appear directly in any single decision and cannot be noticed by one person alone, it persists through model weights and creates overall injustice in large-scale use, harming the fairness and humanistic stance that communication should have.

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3.3. Privacy and penetration: the loss of communicative boundaries

AIGC depends on massive data resources and therefore stands in an inherent tension with data security and privacy protection. As for data sources, the current practice of crawling public online material on a large scale—including personal statements, images, and physical conditions—for training has not necessarily obtained the consent of the original rights holders, and much information is used without people noticing. As for application, the privacy and business secrets that users enter may be leaked: in 2023, Samsung quickly halted the use of generative AI by the departments concerned after employees sent source code to ChatGPT. At a deeper level, once biometric features such as faces and voiceprints enter training or forgery processes, the consequences of their leakage are hard to undo: a password can be changed, but a face and a voiceprint cannot be changed at will. The convenient arrangements of digital communication rest on users' long-term surrender of data, and AIGC makes the boundary of that surrender unclear: users cannot know exactly how their data are used, where they go, or what results they produce, so genuine informed consent is hard to establish with current technology, and individuals face the worry that their subject rights are slowly stripped away within "digital existence."

3.4. Disputes and disempowerment: the rupture of the chain of rights and responsibilities

AIGC has also shaken the rights and responsibilities involved in communication. From the angle of ownership, the copyrightability of AI-generated content and the question of who should hold the rights—the user, the developer, or no one—remain unsettled in the laws of different countries. In November 2023, the Beijing Internet Court, in the "first case of copyright in AI text-to-image," analyzed an image obtained through a user's prompt-based creation and judged it to be a work protected by copyright; the U.S. Copyright Office, by contrast, still excludes purely AI-generated content from registration and recognizes only the human labor within it. The current divergence among judicial cases is exactly a sign of the tension between legal terms and technical reality. From the angle of responsibility, the structure represented by "human-machine co-offense" makes the traditional gatekeeping mechanism largely fail. In 2023, the American technology media outlet CNET used AI over a long period to write financial reports that repeatedly contained factual errors, drawing considerable criticism for having "no one at the gate." When news organizations use AI to produce content, it is hard to check every item; platforms invoke "technological neutrality" to shift responsibility away; model designers explain results by pointing to "user instructions"; and users prove their innocence by saying "the machine did it." Responsibility is divided among all parties and concentrated in none, producing in the end a governance gap of "everyone participates, no one is responsible." The weakening of media responsibility both blocks remedies for concrete victims and dissolves the professional logic of self-correction in the field of communication.

4. Normative paths for digital communication in the AIGC era

In response to the risks above, no single-dimensional means of governance can work. This paper proposes a four-in-one normative path of "institutional constraint—responsibility strengthening—technical-ethical shaping—literacy improvement," seeking a dynamic balance between encouraging technological innovation and guarding the ethical bottom line.

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4.1. Institutional constraint: building a prudent legal and regulatory framework

Institutions should be the bottom-line guarantee of governance. China has so far built an initial regulatory system for AIGC. The Provisions on the Management of Deep Synthesis in Internet Information Services, issued at the end of 2022, brought deep synthesis services under labeling, review, and security assessment for the first time [9]. The Interim Measures for the Management of Generative Artificial Intelligence Services, effective from 2023, take inclusive prudence and tiered, categorized oversight as regulatory principles and set obligations for training material, content labeling, and complaint handling [10]. The Measures for Labeling AI-Generated and Synthetic Content, published in 2025, further clarify both explicit and implicit labels, moving AI-generated content toward a stage of "circulation with credentials." Abroad, the risk-based tiered regulation in the EU's Artificial Intelligence Act can also serve as a reference. Looking ahead along this line, legislation should keep studying the copyright of AI-generated content, algorithmic bias, and cross-border data issues, while adopting "agile governance" methods—regulatory sandboxes, dynamic analysis, and similar tools—so that institutions do not fall behind technology and governance gaps caused by slow regulation are avoided.

4.2. Responsibility strengthening: rebuilding a system of shared responsibility among multiple subjects

To repair the rupture of rights and responsibilities, responsibility must be repositioned and implemented at every link of the communication chain. Model designers should bear responsibility at the source and provide the necessary guarantees for training data and model safety. Platforms must establish their subject responsibility, improve the labeling, review, and tracing systems for AI-related content, and give up the illusion of exemption through "technological neutrality." Users should answer for their terminal behavior and not push the consequences of synthetic content onto others. News organizations should restore the tradition of human-machine verification and require that AI-assisted information be checked by professional judgment before release. Industry associations can also act at this point, gathering ethical norms, accident cases, and good practices to form a situation of joint governance by government, industry, companies, and society. Thinking about responsibility should hold on to "chain connectivity": no subject at any link may escape its obligations because of technical difficulty.

4.3. Ethical shaping: embedding value alignment in the whole technology life cycle

Ethical governance cannot treat technology only as an external object; it must enter technology itself. Value alignment should be an element running through the whole process of model design, training, and iteration. Reinforcement learning from human feedback (RLHF), red-team testing, and bias analysis can guide models so that their behavior meets the standards of truthfulness, fairness, and dignity. Explainability techniques can open the algorithmic "black box," making bias and skew easy to identify and to pursue. Digital watermarking and content provenance can attach a trustworthy "certificate of origin" to AI content, using technical means to support the confirmation of authenticity. Some mainstream platforms and manufacturers have already begun to label AI-generated content, which is a starting point for the engineering of technical ethics. Only when ethical thinking comes before technical patches can "responsible artificial intelligence" become an actual engineering result.

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4.4. Literacy improvement: cultivating digital media literacy for all

Beyond technology and institutions, human judgment is the last barrier against ethical risk. Media literacy education for the public should develop to the level indicated by "algorithmic literacy" and "AI literacy": explain clearly the logic and limits of generated content, treat deepfakes with caution, and form the habit of cross-checking information from multiple sources. For professional communication, human-machine collaboration should be made part of professional training, with the recognition that AI is only a means, not a bearer of responsibility. For teenagers and other easily influenced groups, schools and families must include AI ethics in their teaching and encourage reflective learning and self-discipline in digital behavior. Only when society broadly possesses cognitive resistance do the defensive lines set by institutions and technology gain a real foundation.

5. Conclusion

AIGC names an irreversible reconstruction of the digital communication ecosystem—the changes in production efficiency, forms of expression, subject composition, and communication logic all foretell the general arrival of the age of intelligent communication. Yet the positive effects of technology have their reverse side: authenticity may be destroyed, bias reappears, privacy goes unprotected, and rights and responsibilities go unimplemented, and these ethical problems tend to concentrate. The risks described above are not a price that technology itself is destined to pay but a sign of governance failure. The four-in-one normative approach of "institution—responsibility—technology—literacy" proposed in this paper takes institutions as the bottom line, applies responsibility along the chain, lets technology embody values, and makes literacy the basic safeguard; the four must be combined, and none can be missing. It should be stated clearly that the ethical governance of AIGC cannot expect a once-and-for-all outcome: as technology develops, norms must keep up; as risks change, governance must cooperate. If the idea of putting people first and giving technology virtue is consistently carried out, AIGC will be a communication resource that promotes social well-being rather than a risky element that destroys trust.

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