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Fascinated and Frightened:

How are communications professionals
viewing the AI opportunity ahead?



USC Annenberg
Center for Public Relations

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SUMMARY

AI Readiness Critical to the Future of Communications Opportunity Exists for Experimentation, Increased AI Fluency and a New Mindset

“Everything will change this year — the world before 2023, and the world after.”

– Director, Communications Consultancy

Does this sound familiar? In just the past few decades, we’ve witnessed several technological advancements that have meant total paradigm shifts for our work as communicators. In our assessment, as an agency with a 40-year legacy sitting at the intersection of innovation, culture and commerce, this latest advance in artificial intelligence rises to that level.

We’re seeing headlines daily about the business and societal impacts of generative AI. And, as a collective community of communications professionals, we have an opportunity to make sense of this new technology and internalize how it will impact our businesses.

We’ve been thinking deeply about how this new wave of AI technology will change our own work as communicators. How will it make us smarter? More efficient? More creative? And how can we help navigate the immediate challenges and larger societal impacts that come with AI adoption? Put more simply — how do we make sure our industry is ready for this massive change to our work, our lives and our world?

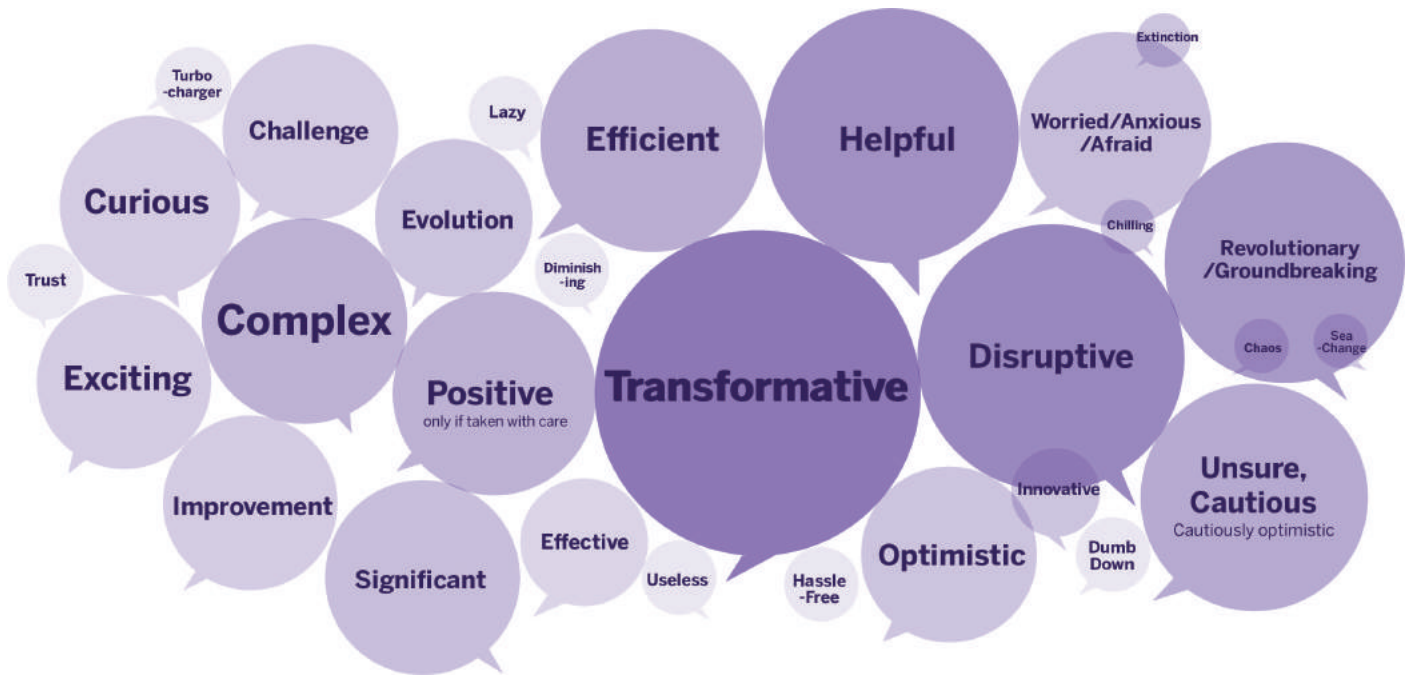
As WE Communications continues to experiment with new AI use cases ourselves, and in partnership with our clients, we’ve been curious about how our peers are feeling, so we partnered with the USC Annenberg Center for Public Relations to understand how communications leaders are responding to this recent explosion of interest in AI. We asked nearly 400 communications leaders across the U.S. about their level of excitement and concern, about how they are (or are not) already using AI in their work and, most significantly, about their expectations for the impact AI will have on our industry.

The survey — fielded in April 2023, just after a handful of generative AI systems using large language models such as Microsoft Bing, ChatGPT, Adobe Firefly and Google Bard were released for public use — revealed **four key findings that represent opportunities and a call-to-action for the communication industry.**

1. AI fluency and generative AI experimentation in communications are low; opportunity for education and action.
2. Most communications leaders see efficiency benefits in the short run; yet there is interest to expand beyond to better understand new forms of creativity in the future.
3. Communications leaders are acutely aware of the challenges with AI adoption.
4. New skills and a mindset shift for communicators are key to capturing the AI opportunity.

The good news is that communications leaders are beginning to see the massive impact this latest technological disruption will have on our work. “I’m fascinated and frightened by it, all at the same time,” said a Communications Strategist/Planner from a Government Agency. This mix of fear and fascination permeated the responses, with reservations around security, privacy and disinformation balanced by a sense of curiosity and optimism.

ONE WORD THAT COMES TO MIND WHEN YOU THINK OF AI’S IMPACT ON COMMS



What follows is a summary of our key findings and our recommendations for how to orient your communications organization toward AI readiness, seize the AI opportunity, and be champions for thoughtful, ethical adoption.

KEY FINDINGS

1 AI fluency and generative AI experimentation in communications are low; opportunity for education and action

The communication leaders we surveyed overwhelmingly see the importance of AI to our industry, with **80% saying AI will be “extremely or very important”** to the future of PR work.

“There are applications to this technology we haven’t even explored yet,” said a researcher in communications for an educational institution. “This truly is just the beginning.”

At the same time, there’s a lot yet to learn. Rightfully so, given we’re at the beginning of this massive disruption to our industry.

In addition to a majority of communication leaders not feeling fully knowledgeable about the applications for AI in comms, experimentation is low, with the exception of ChatGPT. There is far more one-off experimentation — or no experimentation at all — with generative AI tools than there is deliberate consideration or active incorporation of these tools into the work communications professionals do.

Only **16%** say they are **extremely knowledgeable** about applications of AI in comms.

Today's tools

In what ways, if any, are you and/or colleagues experimenting with each of the following AI-driven applications?

	Not experimenting with this	Experimenting on a one-off basis	Have or are looking for ways to incorporate into work
ChatGPT	13%	25%	59%
Bing Chat	39%	19%	35%
Google Bard	39%	20%	33%
DALL·E	52%	14%	25%
Midjourney	54%	13%	23%
Stable Diffusion	58%	10%	22%
Jasper	55%	12%	22%
Chatsonic	63%	8%	17%
Chinchilla	63%	9%	16%

The adoption curve for AI in comms is poised to be one of the fastest we have ever seen, once it hits an inflection point. Our survey suggests we aren't there yet.

Only 23% say their organization is currently making changes to the way they work due to new AI tools.

How quickly and in what ways we embrace this emerging technology will determine the future of the industry. And first movers to develop competencies in generative AI and understand the communications use cases stand to gain an advantage in that future.

Research & text generation

Tools built on Large Language Models that function as chatbots











-  Bing Chat
-  Google Bard
-  ChatGPT
-  Hugging Face
-  Jasper
-  Predis.ai





Image generation

Tools that can generate images based on natural language prompts

-  Adobe Firefly
-  DALL·E 2
-  Midjourney
-  stability.ai

Video, audio & music

Emerging AI applications for video, audio and music

-  KAIBER
Embedded Deep Learning Framework
-  Mubert
-  synthesia
-  LALAL.AI

2 Most communications leaders see efficiency benefits in the short run; yet there is interest to expand beyond to better understand new forms of creativity in the future

Today's communications professionals see AI as a tool to help us work faster, more efficiently and at a greater scale.

88% say AI will have a **positive impact** on the speed and efficiency of certain work tasks, and **72%** say it will help **reduce workloads**.

Much further down the list is creativity, with only **55% of comms professionals** saying PR and comms creativity will be positively impacted by AI and **25% saying it will negatively impact our creativity**.

One private company President/CEO noted: "My hope is that AI frees up my workers from the mundane and allows them to be creative in all aspects of my company." This point of view suggests AI frees up headspace to be more creative, not that the AI itself can be a partner in creativity. We don't just need AI to give back time. We need AI to work with us to create bigger, better, more attention-demanding ideas and activations that will impact the work we do.

From inviting an AI chatbot to your next brainstorm to unlocking novel insights based on quicker access to larger sets of data, there is a role for AI riding alongside, not just toiling independently in the backseat.

For now, content creation is where AI is showing up the most in the day-to-day work of the PR professionals we surveyed:

Top Types of Content Being Created With AI Input		Ways AI Is Showing Up in Day-to-Day Comms Work	
Email	31%	Content creation	57%
Executive summaries/key findings	29%	Background/landscape research on sectors, industries, etc.	43%
Social posts	27%	Data analysis	40%
Articles	27%	Language translation	34%
Blogs	25%	Audience insights and targeting	32%
Press releases	22%		
Presentations	21%		

3 Communications leaders are acutely aware of the challenges with AI adoption

The adoption of any new technology comes with a host of fears, challenges and societal considerations. As communicators, it's important that we deeply understand these considerations and serve as a voice for ethical adoption.

The main AI reservations of the communications professionals we surveyed were about security, privacy and disinformation. Conversely, cost is not a significant concern — it was selected by only **15% of communicators**.

Main reservations or concerns about the adoption of AI tools in the PR discipline

Factual errors and misinformation	61%
Fake information/disinformation	58%
Algorithmic bias	50%
Data privacy	45%
Information security	44%
Unknown/potential legal ramifications	43%
Limited industry knowledge on how to use the tools	39%
Algorithmic transparency	33%
Tools are not built with accessibility in mind	18%
Financial burden to companies	15%
Lack of need	14%

Some of the communications leaders we surveyed flagged the need to keep ethics at the center of our adoption of AI. Ethical challenges weren't necessarily viewed as a reason not to experiment with AI, but rather a reminder to do it thoughtfully.



DATA PROTECTION

4 New skills and a mindset shift for communicators are key to capturing the AI opportunity

To fully embrace the potential of AI, we must increase our AI readiness by building new skills that unlock AI’s potential as a partner and collaborator. The proliferation of AI will require communicators to hone certain skills and build new ones.

We’ll have access to more data and insights more quickly and at greater scale, providing an even bigger opportunity for us to understand the landscape and build differentiated strategic counsel tailored to specific audiences.

Characteristics that will become more or less important as AI continues to advance and impact the way we work in comms	More important	No change	Less important
Ability to write good AI prompts and queries	87%	9%	4%
Human-computer interaction knowledge	82%	14%	4%
Strategic thinking	79%	16%	5%
Data and analytics experience	75%	16%	9%
Creativity	71%	22%	7%
Interpersonal communication skills	68%	27%	6%
Social media knowledge	66%	27%	7%
Media relations expertise	58%	32%	9%
Writing skills	57%	28%	15%
Ability to code	53%	25%	23%

Survey respondents understand that communicators will need to become proficient in writing strategic prompts. As natural language replaces computer code and Boolean strings as the dominant way to interact with technology, those who can ask the best questions will get the most value out of AI.

Also high on the list are the need to be a strategic thinker and understand the interactions between humans and computers — along with all the other comms skills

that can be accomplished only with a heavy human touch.

All this points to a change in mindset. We need to expand our view of AI beyond efficiency and consider the ways this technology can help communicators be more strategic and creative. We need to understand deeply how AI technology works so that we can lead the way in the fight against misinformation. And we need to dream big as AI developments unlock new use cases for our industry.

AI READINESS PLAYBOOK

To increase your communications organization's AI readiness and tap into the full power of generative AI, we recommend four immediate next steps.

Develop a query-based mindset

Practice asking questions to the generative AI tools that are available today. We've found that the more creative your question is, the more creative the AI has license to be in response. Creative queries can push you out of your comfort zone and spark fresh ideas.

- If you're trying to make a very technical blog post more approachable, ask ChatGPT to rewrite it in rhyming couplets like a nursery rhyme.
- If a social post is missing pizzazz, ask ChatGPT to rewrite it in the style of a comedian that you or your target audience like.
- Generative AI chatbots work like a conversation, so if you are underwhelmed by its response to your first query, continue with follow-up questions to lead it to something better.
- Begin experimenting with different approaches to prompt writing and discuss results with others — try outlining a specific goal, persona and list of tasks.
- You can even use one AI tool to help write prompts for another — Microsoft Bing can be helpful in writing good prompts for AI image generators like Stable Diffusion or DALL·E 2.

Start experimentation with specific set of actions

You can't capture the value of your work with AI if you don't have a plan in advance.

- Approach each AI tool with a specific goal in mind you'd like to test, like Midjourney's ability to help create moodboards or ChatGPT's ability to create executive briefing sheets.

- Take notes on what your goal was, how you tried to accomplish it, what the tool provided and any key finding — like ways of phrasing the query that maximized results.

Build your AI fluency

Don't hesitate to try new tools as they come out. At this state in generative AI's development, guidance is not to include sensitive or confidential information unless you've vetted the tool's security practices, but beyond that, building fluency can only be accomplished by doing. Only then will you get the feel that you prefer Midjourney to DALL·E, or that you prefer the way Microsoft Bing cites its sources over how Google Bard does.

Unlock new avenues of creativity in your organization by tapping into AI

Bring AI into your next brainstorm. The way you ask questions to an AI may differ from how you pose them to a room of colleagues.

- Play around with tools like ChatGPT, Microsoft Bing and Google Bard and they may surprise you with an idea you did not think of, or spark your own ideation in a new way.
- Or use Midjourney to dream up what a partnership between two unlikely brands could look like. At the very least, because large-language model tools generally average out ideas from vast catalogs of writing, it can compile a menu of the most obvious solutions to a communications problem that your team can use as a baseline to build upon.

CONCLUSION

Artificial intelligence is already transforming our industry, our communities and our personal lives. This sweeping change means that beyond our own AI readiness, we must think about AI through our roles as ambassadors and protectors of our brands.

***As one respondent put it,
“our profession is one of change,
and we have to jump fully in,
understand, and lead.”***

*– Communications Strategist
/Planner, Freelance*

Even as AI becomes an ever more powerful collaborator, we must keep humans at the center of the decisions we make. We must always ask how our use of AI benefits people, organizations, communities and the world.

Experimenting with these new tools and increasing our AI fluency will allow us to guide our organizations through the ethical, moral and societal considerations around AI adoption. Our challenge is to work with AI so that it will be our partner on this exciting journey.



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