

# ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

And the New Imperative for Communicators

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**WIE** | Brands in *Motion*



# Foreword

Ever since humans learned to communicate, we have told stories to each other to sort through the chaos of the natural world. It has enabled us to connect and to create together—to organize and exercise power.

Today, we live in a time of acceleration. We must contend with vast information flows, inundating us in every waking moment and transforming our worldview. Yet human nature hasn't changed quite as quickly. So even as we adopt more intelligent technology, we must also safeguard our humanity. It's a necessary synchronicity between how we calibrate all this knowledge and how we relate trustfully with each other.

**“ It's a critical moment for communication leaders to step up. Technology, especially artificial intelligence (AI), is set to reshape our relationships with business, government, customers, clients, and citizens. ”**

Increasingly, machines are leveraging the data that we each generate every second of our lives. That data will help us understand ourselves and spark change, differently.

We need to be the ones to help make the right decisions around the development, adoption, and deployment of the technologies that will make the most sense of this data. We also need to tell the right stories that continue to inspire us around the values that matter most to us.

Ultimately, communication leaders must understand how human nature is adapting to technology and work to align that technology with human nature without exploiting people. We are the agents of translation and transformation, and we operate at the core of our respective organizations. From this unique perspective, we can see and champion the inclusion of all our stakeholders and their needs. Technology itself is neither the problem nor the solution: It merely amplifies existing human forces. So, we should focus on how these tools might make things better—or worse—in how we interact with each other.

This is the heart of our graduate program for communication professionals at the University of Washington in Seattle. We are proud to ally this ethos with the like-minded thought leaders at WE Communications. Our research partnership and community engagement have led to this paper, which includes a powerful statement from Vikram Jandhyala, the university's head of innovation, who died just before publication. We honor Vikram's legacy by looking carefully and clearly at the world unfolding before us. Equally important, we hope you will also see how you can help shape this imminent reality to the benefit of us all.



—Hanson Hosein  
Director, Communication Leadership graduate program  
University of Washington

# Introduction: brand motion in the age of AI

There's no doubt that AI is fueling innovation across industries, but just what impact is it having on the communications sector? What does the future hold for communicators and the brands they support?

In "[Brands in Motion: Innovation, Ethics and Reason](#)," we discussed how all brands are in constant motion, driven by—and in relationship to—the technologies that dominate their markets and the external forces that influence them.

AI is a massive force impacting the motion of brands across every industry, and it is driving the next big motion in influence and storytelling. From image recognition to data-driven news articles, AI is changing the way we “do” communications.

“**Human storytelling is based on shared experience, knowledge, and emotion. While AI will bring monumental changes, we’ll still need people at the helm to add the texture and surprise that compel us to keep reading and keep engaging.**”  
—Steve Clayton, chief storyteller, Microsoft

The upside of AI is already apparent, from voice assistants that change channels to thermostats that learn your unique heating needs. But AI is only as good as the data it is fed, and early development and deployment have exposed a soft underbelly vulnerable to bias and bad actors. As AI becomes more prevalent, it raises questions of ethics, power, and potential—with major implications for business and society—and demands both greater scrutiny and a more elevated role for our industry.

As we enter this next phase of innovation, **professional communicators have an essential part to play in how emerging technologies and new advances, like AI, are used and applied in both our own work and the work of clients we advise, whether they be internal or external.**



Not since the internet has our industry faced an opportunity of such magnitude: one that will enable us to shape perception in radically new ways and influence the impact of new technologies on the lives of people around the world. To do both, we'll need a solid understanding of the tech—the people behind it, the algorithms at play, the integrity of the data, and potential uses and misuses.

AI has existed for decades, but mainstream use and adoption are in the early stages, making this a perfect time for our industry to elevate to new heights as both advocates and the conscience for ethical and smart use of AI.

**“ AI will have a greater impact on our profession and the world than the internet did. The internet provided a new channel to reach and understand. AI is going to provide insights that are not knowable today, and it raises societal issues that the internet barely surfaced. It's exciting but also something that requires a great deal of thought and discussion within our profession and within society itself. ”**

**—Jon Iwata, former senior vice president and chief brand officer, IBM**

**“ With the changing demographics, people want authenticity from brands or organizations. If we are not seeing authentic communication, just-in-time response on social media, the brand's reputation drops immediately, and quite significantly. ”**

**—Jean Valin, principal, Valin Strategic Communications**





# The evolution of influence

Throughout history, technological innovation has spurred some of the greatest developments of all time. From the windmill to the steam engine, technology has changed—and continues to alter—the course of human life. AI is fueling a similar shift in the world of communications, impacting the evolution of influence and storytelling. In fact, many believe that AI will represent a greater change to our work and our lives than the advent of the internet.



Major focus on publicity and media to influence consumers. One-way communication, pushing out information.

Advent of the internet in the '90s: opportunity to go more directly to audiences; influencers emerge. Beginning of a two-way dialogue.

Social media explodes: Organizations begin to use social channels to build community and create authentic connections.



AI-enabled communications: deeper, more meaningful, and more relevant as tech is built to augment human interactions and target messages to audiences more precisely; new considerations arise.

# Unlocking new storytelling potential

AI will change how and where we tell stories. Predictive analytics, already in use by companies around the world, will make its way into the communicator's playbook, allowing us to combine historical and real-time data to project trends and stay ahead of them. With greater and greater accuracy, AI will help us identify the best story to tell, where to tell it, and who will want to hear it. Hyper-targeted storytelling of this nature will reach ever more segmented audiences and enable personalization of messages at finer levels of detail, including, if you can believe it, one's mood. And, while all of this is exciting, new capabilities require that communicators pay even greater attention to how our own organizations and the brands we advise collect and use data. In the next five years, we see three major motions.



**Audiences will connect better with the brands they feel are communicating with them on a personal level. Predictions are that organizations that invest in top personalization will outsell companies that haven't by around 30%.**



**—Kerry Sheehan, vice chair, Artificial Intelligence in PR, Chartered Institute of Public Relations**

## 1. Hyper-personalization

In the last five years, channels have exploded in number and micro-influencers have gained even more prominence. As AI allows us to gather and analyze more and more data faster than ever before, our ability to understand audiences and identify who or what influences them will improve vastly as well.

In this new ecosystem, brands and communicators will be able to reach micro-communities with ever more specific and tailored messages and stories, potentially driving deeper and more meaningful relationships and connections.



**We are at risk of feeling more connected to a brand, via its tweets, chatbots, and voice platforms, while simultaneously feeling a bit empty when we find out that it's rarely a human behind those interactions.**



**—Angela Pham, UX content strategist, Facebook**

## 2. Emergence of new channels: richer experiences

AI is changing how audiences consume content and interact with brands. In the not-too-distant future, tech will fall into the background of everyday life. Voice-enabled search optimization and services delivered through virtual personal assistants like Amazon's Alexa, Microsoft's Cortana, and Apple's Siri are prominent entry points for people to engage with AI, but our cars, appliances, wearables, and toys will all become new channels of expression and information.

AI technology will also improve the way we communicate through messaging platforms, elevating our messaging IQ by detecting nuances to connect words with feelings and strengthening our connections through digital communication. By linking interactive content to emotions and intentions, AI can offer relevant content right when users need it, enabling a digital conversation that flows naturally.

**“ As AI-driven decision-making becomes more prevalent, it will begin to become the standard. The differentiators then become those who have access to better or more comprehensive data sets. As a result, it's possible that the meaning of influence and the value ascribed to an influencer may become more calculated and data driven as a focus on measurable outcomes rises in importance. ”**  
—Cara Buscaglia, vice president, Global Solutions, Talkwalker

Some of today's customer service bots, like Bank of America's chat bot Erica, have emerged as the recognized faces of brands—carrying the brand voice through two-way interactions with customers. There is an opportunity for data-driven bots and personal assistants to make inroads in influence as perceived “impartial” information sources, but this will depend on how well they address consumer needs and their ability to earn the trust of those using them.

**“ Brands will take on a more human form through bots and automation. By 2020, we will be having more conversations with bots than our spouses. ”**  
—Nitin Mantri, WE Avian





At the moment, these bots and assistants function more as glorified search engines than human helpers, but this is changing. As they take on more consumer interactions with features that are more meaningful and more human, assistants of this type will also become completely new channels for storytelling. Communicators and brands looking to make an impact here will need to understand what storytelling looks like within these frameworks and combine this knowledge with profound creativity to develop human-like understanding and responses that result in authentic brand voices.

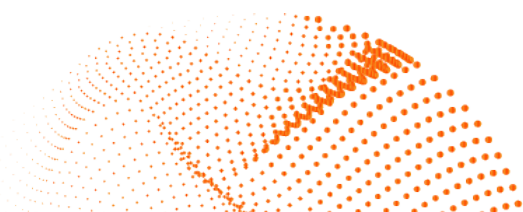
Communicators should consider these AI-fueled communication channels in the context of brand voice. Imagine an audio story told by a voice assistant that responds and adjusts based on a user's reactions and choices. Or an interactive story that allows the audience to get basic questions answered by a chat bot that responds on-brand and in the style and tone of a celebrity spokesperson. The most creative communicators will think not only about the story they are telling but the persona of the virtual identity that's telling it.

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**We shouldn't underestimate one element that is core to humanity, which no machine has been able to accurately replicate—and that is creativity and appeal to human emotion. In light of this, humans will continue to be essential to ensure there is a human appeal, and to continue to push the boundaries with new ideas that have perhaps never been heard before.**

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**—Julien Cerutti, head of Business Development, AI, and Outside Insight, Meltwater**



# Bad bot!

Victoria Beckham's Facebook chat bot, which she launched to celebrate 10 years of her designer brand, produced some strange responses when asked about her husband, soccer star David Beckham.

Would divorcing David make you happy?

Very.

Does David's money make you happy?

Very.

Are you happy with David?

I can't tell you anything more.

# New forms of content creation: machines that write and create

When fed the right data, machines can create content that humans don't recognize as machine generated. We are seeing the earliest examples of this with media organizations like the Associated Press publishing articles with information gathered, analyzed, and written in news form entirely by AI.

So far, these stories are straight reportage—factual in nature, with no color commentary or artistic license. But, in the hands of communications professionals who can add creativity and color, this type of automation can become a powerful tool for things like A/B headline testing, crafting a blog post, or helping uncover a new insight about an important audience.



**Two areas are ripe for near-term change: coverage reporting and media outreach. Coverage reporting is particularly antiquated. The idea that a PR intern needs to manually pull coverage, evaluate, and format it for your company's specific format needs to be changed. It costs far too many budget dollars for the impact of an email that is ignored by most executives.**

**—Troy Edwards, director, Public Relations, HTC Vive**



From our perspective, the major advantages here are interconnected: Automation will save untold hours typically spent drafting, formatting, and distributing data-driven content, freeing up time for the higher-level and (let's face it) more interesting and strategic work to position our brands and clients for success.



Although we're certain to see more publishers and creators using AI to create simple, fact-based content in the near term, OpenAI, a nonprofit AI research organization, recently announced its breakthrough GPT-2, an AI model that can generate content of "unprecedented quality." Translation: as well as humans. This model has massive implications for conversational bots, language translation, AI writing assistants, and more. But here, too, ethics come into play. OpenAI has decided not to release its full model at this juncture due to the potential for malicious applications.

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**There's a heap of reporting, targeting, and analytical functions that even existing iterations of AI tech could be doing right now, freeing up time to do what I think this discipline does best, and that's devoting time to developing compelling brand narratives and content. I'd love more time to do that—and have the data to inform where, when, and to whom those stories and content should be best deployed.**

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**—Michael Herrmann, director, International PR and Corporate Communications, Robert Half**

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**Certain things will still very much depend on human expertise. Take storytelling: What stories do we want to tell? There has to be a strategy element there. What is the intention of the stories? It isn't just to delight and entertain, it's to get people to believe and act upon their beliefs. That's a human judgment as to what a company wants stakeholders to do or not do. That's a deeper-level strategy.**

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**—Jon Iwata, former senior vice president and chief brand officer, IBM**



# Understanding the implications of AI on our industry, our brands, and our world

AI is already fueling data-driven changes in the communications industry. Further advances will both necessitate and facilitate our industry's evolution. While helping us better understand and connect with audiences, AI will also change the nature of communications jobs, automating data-driven tasks and creating new roles for communicators as curators of AI content and guardians of the truth in an age where data and image manipulation capabilities will more and more support the ability to fake people out.

To take advantage of the opportunities AI creates, we also need to understand the potential impacts of AI on the brands and industries we represent.



**I think the most important imperative is to frame the conception, development, and deployment of AI within a solid ethical, transparent, and empathetic framework. Regulators can't keep up with the technology, so the onus is on developers to be honest about where and how data is being sourced; empathetic to the needs of end users in originating the tech; and honest in where and how they're monetizing their deployment. If transparency is your North Star, then I think the future is incredibly bright.**



**—Michael Herrmann, director, International PR and Corporate Communications, Robert Half**

## Bias is everywhere

AI is only as good as the data set it has to work with. Data presents—and AI manifests—the inherent biases of those who develop the algorithms and build the AI tools. As an AI learns, it also picks up the biases it finds in the news media and data sets it scrubs. AI, as such, can perpetuate racial, gender, and cultural stereotypes.

Bias is inevitable but mitigating it is not. Communicators can and should pick up the mantle of helping augment ethical AI development by knowing the right questions to ask about AI-powered tools and approaches. Who built the tool? How do the algorithms work? How was the data sourced? What are the points of potential bias?

## Trust is complicated

Before the internet, brands created trust by delivering quality products their audiences wanted and catering to the needs of their customers. Trust was brand centric. Now, as we've uncovered through our Brands in Motion research, trust is a two-way street, where individuals have much more power and influence, brought about by social media and, increasingly, AI. What goes into trust in the age of AI? Authenticity, respect for data, transparency, an elevated regard for customers and an ever-expanding universe of stakeholders, spanning employees to political entities. The quality of personalized experiences (e.g., how accurately or empathetically a digital assistant responds to a customer) will also factor into brand trust.

**“ AI is going to make it easier than ever to deceive people. The technology has already been weaponized—we've seen that—and it will only get easier. The issue here is who to trust when it comes to the media we're seeing, hearing, and reading. Communicators have an opportunity to re-introduce the role of trusted intermediary, to elevate the truth. ”**

**—Tim O'Brien, general manager, AI Programs, Microsoft**

Our own research shows that consumers today hold brands responsible for the ethical use of AI. Ninety-four percent of people surveyed said if brands can't (or won't) use AI ethically, then governments should step in.

AI will demand that communicators demonstrate greater understanding of the elements of trust and how they interact to influence brand perception. AI-savvy communications professionals can help brands connect with new audiences, tell better stories, and build loyalty through smart and transparent communications—whether through today's customer service chat bot or the AI storyteller of the future.

**“ The ethical use of data and algorithms are both potential issues for AI in society. Bias coded into a system will be exaggerated. ”**

**—Stephen Waddington, managing director, Metia Group**

Fluency in trust communications requires that communicators skillfully guide brands to uncover and declare their purpose, on one level, and address tactical issues on another.

**Unlike almost every other technology before it, AI's potential impact on a company's culture is so extensive that deploying it becomes a massive change management exercise—and therefore something that requires more precise, powerful and transparent communications.**



“

It's almost like we need a law or a code [for the people designing AI] that says, 'We will not harm society.' We need clear guidelines for transparency and the ethical use of AI for our own purposes and to advocate for the same with our clients.

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—Vikram Jandhyala, vice president, Innovation Strategy, University of Washington (UW); executive director, UW CoMotion; UW co-leader, Global Innovation Exchange

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When you peel apart how this stuff gets built, you know there is bias at every level of the development process. You can't avoid it.

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—Lee Flanagan, senior vice president and chief business officer, Wave Computing

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I think people will have to be more skilled at understanding how the tech is built, how the algorithm is built, what a bias might be in the construction of this algorithm. All the basic skills will still apply, like good writing research and analysis, but on top of that communicators will need to be data analysts and curious and good challengers of how things are built and operated.

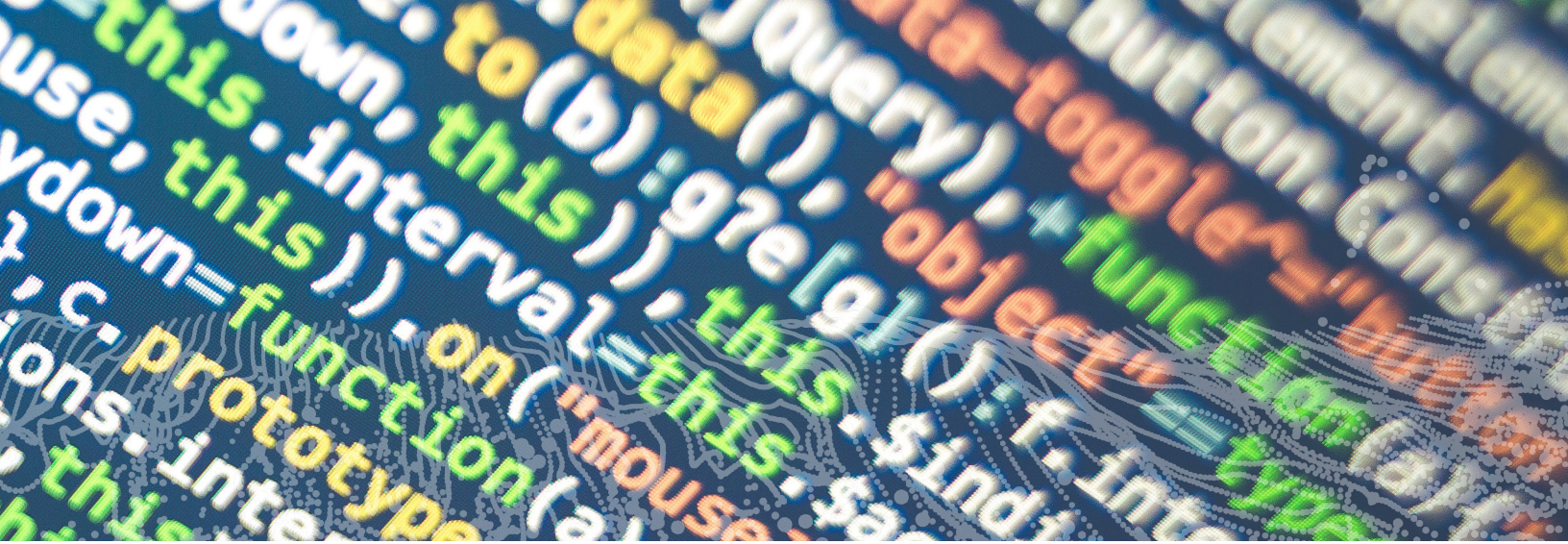
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—Jean Valin, principal, Valin Strategic Communications









**“ I hope we don't get to the point where the art of storytelling is delegated to machines. I don't think anyone needs an AI system that writes the type of longform stories we see in the New York Times Magazine. ”**  
—Steve Clayton, chief storyteller, Microsoft

Not all brands or agencies will have enough data to create a worthy AI tool, though, so supplementing internal data with relevant third-party or crowdsourced data may be necessary. Communicators with a nuanced understanding of the data and knowledge of the AI technologies available can help brands identify the problems they are trying to solve and then think through the kind of data they need to achieve objectives, resulting in an expanded role for communicators. The more we can help brands tap into a deeper view of their audiences, the more value we can provide across the organization.

**“ AI transformation is still a massive challenge among senior leadership in organizations globally. It needs to be adopted from the top down. It's also possible that some organizations are not ready to take advantage of the insights AI can offer. AI, after all, must be fed training data, continually monitored, and managed. It requires someone with the technical understanding to be able to derive the right insights and determine what they might indicate and what that means for the business. ”**  
—Cara Buscaglia, vice president, Global Solutions, Talkwalker



# Netflix: the power of good data

Netflix has grown rapidly from a film distribution network to a successful production company, creating its own highly watched shows and movies. Unlike traditional networks, which spend hundreds of millions of dollars each year commissioning pilots that rarely convert into hit series, Netflix nailed it on its first try with *House of Cards*. No pilot needed. How did they do it?

While traditional networks gather data from Nielsen ratings, surveys, and focus groups, it's not enough for them to predict what's going to be successful and what's not. They need a pilot. But, according to Nick Polson and James Scott, co-authors of *AIQ*, when the *House of Cards* producers went to Netflix, the company used an AI tool to run through user data from their entire subscriber network to arrive at a yay or nay decision. As we all know, the show was wildly successful—and it was data that gave Netflix the confidence to give it a green light.



# AI is here. Are you ready to seize the opportunity?

As AI tools multiply and channels expand, communicators who understand the implications and use cases will have a leg up. It will enable us to be more active listeners. It will help us track, analyze, and predict trends across a vast and ever-growing landscape of channels. If we thought we were reaching the right people with the right message before, AI will allow us to have a deeper understanding of the hearts and minds of our audiences, ensuring not only that we reach the right people with the right ideas, but that we do so in a hyper-personalized context that accounts for likes and dislikes, motivation and aspirations, and much more.

“ **Artificial intelligence has great potential to improve lives. It could also go the other way. It's up to us as communication leaders to envisage a human-centered future, and to help build it.** ”

—Hanson Hosein, director, Communication Leadership graduate program, University of Washington

While AI has the power to radically improve lives, it can be—and has already been—used with ill intent. As we embrace AI, as our clients embrace AI, it will be important to stay focused on the humanity behind the data. Communicators can demonstrate leadership by understanding how AI works and where it is vulnerable and pushing for ethical and transparent use.

**AI is here now, with new technologies taking us on perhaps our most profound journey in centuries. As we move boldly into the future, let's not forget that this journey is about improving the human experience for all people, and that can only happen if we use AI ethically and wisely.**

# Five things you can do now

- 1** Read about AI. AIQ by Nick Polson and James Scott provides an easy-to-read overview of AI, how it works, and how to think about the societal issues that AI raises. There's also great thinking happening in pockets, including Stephen Waddington's #AllnPR project and Jean Valin's paper for the Chartered Institute of Public Relations titled, "Humans Still Needed."
- 2** Begin the process of developing your company's AI guidelines. Call it a manifesto, a declaration, or simply guiding principles, whichever best suits your culture.
- 3** Explore the AI tools available to communicators today. Get an overview of the tools' capabilities, where the data is sourced, and how you're adopting this emerging technology into your work processes. If one doesn't exist, develop a set of guidelines for the ethical use of AI by your agency or department.
- 4** Get to know your engineering teams internally and understand how and what is guiding their development of AI tools.
- 5** Get smart about bots and voice assistants. Learn what goes into programming and how they work. You'll be asked to include bots and voice assistants in a campaign strategy very soon.





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+1.800.938.8136

Business inquiries: [talktowe@we-worldwide.com](mailto:talktowe@we-worldwide.com)

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