


PROMPT-BASED MEANING FORMATION AND CREATIVE AGENCY IN GENERATIVE SYSTEMS WITHIN JOURNALISTIC PRACTICE

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Abstract: The rapid integration of generative AI (GenAI) into journalism is transforming news production from a human-centered process into a hybrid human-machine collaboration, reshaping meaning formation and creative agency. This paper identifies prompt-based interaction as the key mechanism driving these changes, enabling journalists to co-construct content, narrative framing, and factual grounding with probabilistic systems. Drawing on distributed agency and journalistic norms, it analyzes core prompt design techniques, such as role, recursive, retrieval-augmented generation, and chain-of-thought prompting, demonstrating how they support traceable meaning construction and strategic agency.

Keywords: generative AI, prompt engineering, meaning formation, creative agency, journalistic practice, hybrid collaboration

1. Introduction

The rapid integration of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) systems into journalistic workflows has fundamentally transformed the processes of news production, shifting from traditional human-centric authorship to hybrid human-machine collaborations (Cools et al., 2024; Lewis, 2025). Today, artificial intelligence can generate long-form articles, critical essays, or journalistic texts within seconds. A clear example of this is the ability of AI tools such as ChatGPT and DeepSeek to produce coherent, contextually appropriate, and stylistically diverse texts (Kerimbayev et al., 2024). At the heart of this transformation lies prompt-based interaction, wherein journalists craft precise textual instructions-prompts-to elicit outputs from large language models (LLMs) and multimodal GenAI tools. This prompt engineering practice serves as a pivotal site for meaning formation, where semantic content, narrative framing, factual grounding, and tonal nuance emerge not solely from the journalist's intent but through iterative co-construction between human input and stochastic AI generation (Shi, 2024). Such dynamics challenge conventional notions of creative agency in journalism, traditionally understood as the autonomous exercise of editorial judgment, originality, and ethical responsibility (Dodds, 2025). Instead, agency becomes distributed: journalists transition from primary creators to orchestrators who guide, refine, and constrain AI outputs, potentially augmenting creativity through enhanced ideation and efficiency while risking dilution via over-reliance on algorithmic patterns or loss of serendipitous insight (Cools et al., 2024).

Central to this reconfiguration is the strategic design of prompts, which functions as the principal mechanism through

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which journalists exert influence over GenAI outputs and navigate the tensions between augmentation and erosion of professional autonomy. Prompt design techniques, ranging from role assignment and structured reasoning to iterative refinement and knowledge grounding, merit close consideration because they embody the micro-level practices that shape macro-level shifts in meaning formation and agency distribution. By deliberately structuring inputs to encode journalistic norms, constrain probabilistic variation, enhance transparency, and anchor outputs in verifiable sources, these techniques allow practitioners to maintain ethical and editorial oversight amid the inherent unpredictability of generative systems (Bradshaw, 2025; Allaham, 2024). Addressing such techniques is therefore indispensable for comprehending how journalists adapt to hybrid workflows, reclaim elements of creative control, and mitigate risks such as factual drift or normative dilution.

2. Literature Review

The integration of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) into journalistic practice has rapidly expanded the scholarly discourse on news production, professional norms, and epistemic processes. While early studies focused mainly on rule-based automation (e.g., robot journalism for routine reporting), the emergence of large language models and multimodal GenAI tools since 2022 has shifted attention toward creative, stochastic content generation (Bartleman et al., 2026; Molla, 2025; van Dalen, 2024).

Systematic reviews document a dramatic increase in publications—up to 172% in 2024, driven by accessible tools such as ChatGPT, Claude, and Gemini (Molla, 2025; Bartleman et al., 2026). Scholars describe four overlapping waves of AI adoption in journalism: recommendation systems, automated text generation, audience analytics, and now generative models capable of producing narratives, summaries, headlines, visuals, and code (Molla, 2025; Lewis, 2025; Wasdahl, 2026). This evolution has moved journalism from purely human-centric authorship toward hybrid human-machine collaboration, raising fundamental questions about meaning formation and creative agency (Cools & Diakopoulos, 2024; Shi & Sun, 2024; Guzman, 2024).

A dominant theme in the literature is the reconfiguration of creative agency. Traditional journalistic agency, centered on editorial judgment, originality, verification, and ethical responsibility, is becoming distributed across human-AI assemblages (Dodds et al., 2025). Journalists are increasingly acting as “orchestrators” or “curators” who guide, refine, and constrain AI outputs rather than authoring every element (Cools & Diakopoulos, 2024; Guzman, 2024; Thomson, 2025). Although GenAI brings efficiency gains in

ideation, drafting, and data analysis, scholars caution against the homogenization of style, deskilling, the loss of serendipity, and the erosion of professional authority (Munoriyarwa & de-Lima-Santos, 2025; Lewis, 2025; Bender, 2025).

Closely related is the question of meaning formation. In conventional journalism, meaning arises from deliberate human encoding of facts, context, tone, and narrative framing. GenAI introduces probabilistic generation, making meaning an emergent product of iterative human-prompt and machine-output interaction (Shi & Sun, 2024). This creates opportunities for richer synthesis but also risks such as hallucinations, bias amplification, and opaque reasoning (Cools & Diakopoulos, 2024; Ercanbrack, 2025).

Prompt engineering has emerged as a critical new literacy to address these challenges. It is now understood not as mere technical input but as a communicative and editorial practice that shapes how meaning is negotiated and agency is exercised (Allaham, 2024; Bradshaw, 2025; Knight Center, 2026). Journalism-specific resources highlight techniques including role prompting, chain-of-thought reasoning, retrieval-augmented generation (RAG), recursive refinement, and negative prompting to improve traceability, factual grounding, and ethical alignment (Allaham, 2024; Bradshaw, 2025; Open Notebook, 2025).

Despite this growing body of work, important gaps remain. Most studies are conceptual or based on early-adopter perceptions rather than longitudinal observations of daily prompting practices in diverse newsrooms (Bartleman et al., 2026; Molla, 2025; Simon et al., 2025). There is limited micro-level analysis of how specific prompt techniques influence meaning formation and creative agency in everyday journalistic work. This paper addresses that gap by defining and analysing key prompt design techniques as mechanisms that mediate hybrid meaning-making and agency redistribution in generative systems

3. Methods

This conceptual paper adopts a qualitative-interpretive approach to examine how prompt design techniques mediate meaning formation and creative agency in generative AI-assisted journalistic practice. Rather than generating primary empirical data, the study synthesizes and critically analyses established prompt engineering practices documented in recent journalism and AI scholarship (Allaham, 2024; Bradshaw, 2025; Molla, 2025).

The analytical framework draws on theories of distributed agency (Dodds et al., 2025) and semiotic meaning-making in hybrid human-machine systems (Shi & Sun, 2024; Guzman, 2024). Seven core prompt techniques were identified through a targeted review of journalism-specific prompting literature and practitioner

resources. Each technique is defined, linked to its influence on meaning formation and creative agency, and illustrated with typical newsroom scenarios. This method enables a focused theoretical exploration of micro-level prompting practices and their macro-level implications for professional norms, without requiring new data collection. The approach aligns with recent calls for conceptual work that bridges technical prompt engineering with journalistic epistemology and ethics (Bartleman et al., 2026; Bender, 2025; Thomson, 2025).

4. Results

Building on the conceptual framework and literature reviewed above, the following section presents the seven core prompt design techniques that operationalize meaning formation and creative agency in journalistic practice. Prompt design, often termed prompt engineering in contemporary scholarship, constitutes a burgeoning literacy within hybrid human-AI journalistic workflows, enabling practitioners to systematically shape generative outputs while negotiating the interplay between human intent and algorithmic indeterminacy (Allaham, 2024; Bradshaw, 2025). Far from mere technical optimization, these techniques represent deliberate interventions in the co-generative process: they encode professional norms, structure reasoning pathways, mitigate epistemic risks such as hallucination, and delineate boundaries of agency to preserve journalistic authorship and ethical accountability. In the context of meaning formation, prompt strategies transform stochastic generation into more intentional, traceable semantic construction; in terms of creative agency, they reposition journalists as strategic orchestrators capable of augmenting rather than ceding control to generative systems (Cools et al., 2024; Shi, 2024). The following delineates key techniques adapted and applied within journalistic contexts, drawing on established practices to illustrate their mechanisms and implications for professional practice.

1. **Role Prompting.** Role prompting involves assigning the generative system a specific professional persona or expertise, for example, “You are an experienced editor of a national newspaper with a focus on investigative rigor and ethical standards.” This technique directly influences meaning formation by embedding journalistic norms, tone, and ethical framing into the AI’s generated “persona,” thereby guiding outputs toward domain-specific conventions rather than generic responses (Bradshaw, 2025; Allaham, 2024). By projecting professional identity onto the system, journalists partially reclaim creative agency, acting as directors who steer the AI toward alignment with editorial standards and reduce stochastic drift (Cools & Diakopoulos, 2024).

2. **One-Shot Prompting.** One-shot prompting supplies a

single exemplar within the instruction to demonstrate the desired format, structure, or style, such as “Here is an example of the format of the pitches I want: [example pitch].” In journalistic practice, this method supports meaning formation by constraining generative processes to established templates (e.g., story pitches or headlines), thereby enhancing predictability and consistency while still permitting creative variation (Bradshaw, 2025). It effectively bridges human creative direction and AI execution, preserving the journalist’s agency in shaping output conventions, particularly in time-sensitive newsroom environments.

3. Recursive Prompting. Recursive prompting entails iterative refinement through feedback loops, for instance, “Ideas 3 and 4 are good. Give me more like that.” This technique exemplifies dynamic meaning formation as an emergent, dialogic process between journalist and system, in which agency is distributed across successive cycles of critique and regeneration (Allaham, 2024). By mirroring traditional editorial revision practices, recursive prompting allows journalists to progressively sculpt semantic content and maintain oversight amid the probabilistic nature of GenAI, fostering a form of distributed creativity (Bradshaw, 2025).

4. Retrieval-Augmented Generation (RAG). Retrieval-augmented generation (RAG) integrates external, journalist-curated knowledge sources into the prompt, such as “Factor in the following new information: [retrieved facts/sources].” By grounding outputs in verifiable data, RAG addresses hallucination risks inherent to standalone large language models, thereby strengthening factual meaning formation and reinforcing journalistic agency through human-mediated knowledge injection (Allaham, 2024; Bradshaw, 2025). In news production, this technique shifts creative control toward accuracy and source transparency, aligning GenAI outputs more closely with professional verification norms (Cools & Diakopoulos, 2024).

5. Chain-of-Thought (CoT) Prompting. Chain-of-thought (CoT) prompting instructs the system to articulate intermediate reasoning steps explicitly, for example, “Let’s think this through step-by-step...” before delivering a final response. This approach enhances interpretability and logical coherence in complex journalistic tasks, such as data analysis or claim verification, thereby facilitating traceable meaning formation and augmenting agency by exposing the model’s reasoning pathway for editorial scrutiny (Allaham, 2024). It promotes transparency and supports journalists’ ethical responsibility for output integrity (Bradshaw, 2025).

6. Meta-Prompting. Meta-prompting positions the generative system as an expert in prompt design itself, for instance, “You are an expert in prompt design. Suggest a prompt for...” This

higher-order technique empowers journalists to iteratively refine their own prompting strategies, representing an evolution in creative agency toward meta-level orchestration of human-AI collaboration (Bradshaw, 2025). It fosters adaptive meaning-making literacy, enabling practitioners to optimize interactions for specific journalistic goals and maintain strategic oversight.

7. Negative Prompting. Negative prompting explicitly constrains undesired behaviors, such as “Do not suggest further actions or do more than I have asked.” By setting clear boundaries, this technique safeguards journalistic intent and prevents output drift, thereby preserving agency in delimiting the scope of meaning formation (Allaham, 2024). It underscores the journalist’s role as gatekeeper, ensuring that GenAI remains a subservient tool aligned with professional priorities rather than an autonomous content expander (Cools & Diakopoulos, 2024).

5. Discussion

The findings illustrate that prompt design techniques serve as essential mediators in the reconfiguration of meaning formation and creative agency within generative AI-assisted journalism. Structured techniques such as Chain-of-Thought and Retrieval-Augmented Generation enhance traceability and factual grounding, while role, recursive, and meta-prompting reposition journalists as strategic orchestrators rather than sole authors. These practices offer significant gains in efficiency and ideation, yet they also introduce risks of content homogenization, reduced serendipity, and deskilling (Cools & Diakopoulos, 2024; Dodds et al., 2025).

This shift toward distributed agency raises important questions about professional authority in newsrooms. Prompt literacy therefore emerges as a critical new competency requiring targeted training in both journalism education and newsroom environments (Knight Center, 2026). From an ethical standpoint, clear organizational policies on transparency, authorship attribution, and bias mitigation are essential to maintain public trust (Shi & Sun, 2024).

Limitations of this study stem from its conceptual nature and reliance on illustrative examples rather than longitudinal empirical data. Future research should examine the real-world application of these prompt techniques through ethnographic or experimental studies in diverse journalistic contexts.

6. Conclusions

Prompt-based interaction has emerged as a transformative mechanism in generative AI-assisted journalism, fundamentally reshaping both meaning formation and creative agency. By strategically employing techniques such as role prompting,

recursive refinement, retrieval-augmented generation, chain-of-thought reasoning, and negative prompting, journalists can move beyond passive reliance on stochastic outputs toward intentional, traceable, and norm-aligned co-construction of journalistic content. These techniques reposition practitioners as strategic orchestrators who guide, refine, and constrain generative systems, thereby augmenting efficiency and ideation while preserving essential elements of editorial judgment and ethical responsibility.

Nevertheless, the shift toward distributed agency is not without challenges. While prompt design offers powerful tools for maintaining human oversight, it also carries risks of content homogenization, reduced serendipity, and the potential deskilling of traditional journalistic craft. As GenAI becomes more deeply embedded in newsrooms, prompt literacy must evolve into a core professional competency, supported by targeted training, clear organizational policies on transparency and authorship, and ongoing ethical vigilance.

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ФОРМИРОВАНИЕ СМЫСЛА НА ОСНОВЕ ПРОМПТОВ И ТВОРЧЕСКАЯ АГЕНТНОСТЬ В ГЕНЕРАТИВНЫХ СИСТЕМАХ: В ЖУРНАЛИСТСКОЙ ПРАКТИКЕ

Аннотация: Быстрое внедрение генеративного искусственного интеллекта (GenAI) в журналистику трансформирует производство новостей из человекоцентричного процесса в гибридное сотрудничество человека и машины, перестраивая формирование смысла и творческую агентность. Данная статья определяет взаимодействие на основе промптов как ключевой механизм, управляющий этими изменениями, позволяющий журналистам совместно конструировать контент, нарративную рамку и фактическое обоснование с вероятностными системами. Опираясь на теорию распределенной агентности и журналистские нормы, статья анализирует основные техники проектирования промптов, такие как ролевое промптинг, рекурсивное промптинг, генерация с расширенным поиском (RAG) и цепочка мыслей, демонстрируя, как они поддерживают прослеживаемое конструирование смысла и стратегическую агентность.

Ключевые слова: генеративный искусственный интеллект, инженерия промптов, формирование смысла, творческая агентность, журналистская практика, гибридное сотрудничество

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GENERATIV TIZIMLARDA PROMPT ORQALI MA'NO HOSIL QILISH VA IJODIY AGENTLIK: JURNALISTIKA AMALIYOTIDA

Annotatsiya: Generativ sun'iy intellekt (GenAI) ning jurnalistikaga tez integratsiyalashuvi yangiliklar ishlab chiqarishni inson markazli jarayondan gibrin inson–mashina hamkorligiga aylantirmoqda, ma'no hosil qilish va ijodiy agentlikni qayta shakllantirmoqda. Ushbu maqola prompt asosidagi o'zaro ta'sirni ushbu o'zgarishlarni boshqaruvchi asosiy mexanizm sifatida aniqlaydi, bu jurnalistlarga ehtimollik tizimlari bilan tarkib, hikoya ramkasi va faktlarni asoslashni birgalikda yaratish imkonini beradi. Taqsimlangan agentlik va jurnalistik normalarga asoslanib, u rol, rekursiv, qidiruv bilan kuchaytirilgan generatsiya va fikrlash zanjiri kabi asosiy prompt dizayn texnikalarini tahlil qiladi, ular qanday qilib izlanadigan ma'no qurilishi va strategik agentlikni qo'llab-quvvatlashini ko'rsatadi.

Kalit so'zlar: generativ sun'iy intellekt, prompt muhandisligi, ma'no hosil qilish, ijodiy agentlik, jurnalistika amaliyoti, gibrin hamkorlik

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