Summary

IAP2 Thought Leadership Paper Exploring the Impact of AI in Engagement – Dr Robyn Cochrane & Julian Moore 2024

Summary written by Viv Warren Consulting, September 2024

Click here to access the paper

The integration of AI into engagement practice is a significant shift in the field of engagement. By harnessing AI, engagement practitioners can enhance the quality and reach of their engagement efforts, improve decision-making and foster more inclusive, responsive practices. However, alongside these benefits, AI presents challenges related to bias, data security, accuracy, and potential inequalities (Boyco & Robinson, 2024).

What is AI?

AI is an umbrella term used to describe 'a collection of different techniques and technologies, including machine learning, speech recognition, natural language processing, robotics and predictive analytics' (Office of the Victorian Information Commissioner, 2021, p. 3). However, for much of the lay public the term 'AI' is now synonymous with Generative AI (Gen AI). Gen AI uses complex machine learning and neural network techniques (i.e., generative adversarial networks or variational autoencoders) to produce novel content and generate new data. Gen AI is trained using 'big data'. Notable examples of Gen AI include ChatGPT, Gemini, and CoPilot.

How can AI support engagement?

AI can significantly enhance engagement processes by improving both operational efficiency and the quality of outcomes. AI can enhance the participation experience, improve understanding of the engagement context and target audiences, produce informative content, streamline operational tasks, and facilitate transparency and building trust. For example, engagement practitioners might use AI to:

- **Enhance participation experience**: Provide multilingual and visual support to facilitate participation of diverse group such as offering real-time translation of written or spoken content, or automatically generating infographics, visual summaries, or interactive maps making information more accessible to varying literacy levels or those who find visual learning more effective.
- **Improve understanding**: AI can analyse data to identify trends and deepen insights into engagement contexts and target audiences. For example, AI can analyse large volumes of community feedback to identify common themes, sentiment analysis and provide demographic insights.

- **Content creation**: AI helps in producing informative content, designing adaptive surveys, and generating reports. For example, AI can automatically generate reports summarising the outcomes of community consultations by analysing collected data and highlighting key insights. It can also assist in creating adaptive surveys that adjust questions based on participant responses, ensuring more relevant and targeted data collection.
- **Streamlining tasks**: AI automates data processing, transcription, and analysis, saving time and effort. For example, AI can automatically transcribe and analyse recorded discussions or public meetings, categorising key themes and sentiments. This reduces the manual effort required for data processing and allows practitioners to quickly identify important insights.
- **Building transparency and trust**: By simulating proposal impacts and addressing biases, AI facilitates more transparent engagement. For example, AI can simulate the potential impacts of a new development project by using real-time data and public input, allowing people to visualise various potential outcomes. Additionally, AI can identify and mitigate biases in data analysis, ensuring that all community voices are fairly represented, which helps build trust in the engagement process.

What are some potential challenges?

While AI offers numerous benefits, its integration into engagement practices presents several challenges. To ensure a responsible and effective adoption of AI, engagement practitioners must address key issues such as:

- **Ethical concerns**: AI can introduce biases and raise privacy issues. Organisations should recognise these risks and establish ethical frameworks, including compliance policies that align with regulations.
- **Technical requirements**: Implementing AI often requires specialised skills and resources, which can be a barrier, especially for smaller organisations. Collaborating with experts and developing industry partnerships can help overcome this challenge.
- **Public trust and transparency**: There is often scepticism about AI. To build trust, it's important to communicate clearly about how AI is used, implement transparency protocols, and ensure AI systems are interpretable.
- **Workforce transformation**: AI adoption requires upskilling and reskilling of staff. Ongoing training on ethical AI use and data handling is necessary to keep up with evolving roles.
- **Data governance and privacy**: Ensuring that data is collected and used responsibly, with appropriate consent and anonymisation, is essential. Robust data governance and privacy measures are crucial.
- **Legal and regulatory compliance**: Practitioners must navigate a range of legal frameworks that govern AI use in Australia, including Australian Competition and Consumer laws, Corporations laws, Data protection and privacy laws, Online safety laws, Media and communications laws, as well as Copyright, criminal, and discrimination laws.
- **Ongoing review and accountability**: Conduct regular audits and assessments of AI systems to ensure fairness, and continually update ethical guidelines to reflect the fast pace of AI developments.

Looking to the Future

The following recommendations aim to support engagement practitioners to move forward purposely and harness the power of AI.

- **Understand AI capabilities and limitations:** Invest in education and training to fully grasp what AI can and cannot do.
- **Enhance accessibility and inclusivity:** Leverage multilingual support and assistive technologies to enhance participation.
- **Ensure transparency to build trust:** Clearly disclose and explain how AI is being used in your processes.
- **Focus on data privacy and security:** Anonymise data where possible and make sure data is secured and handled appropriately.
- **Mitigate bias and ensure fairness:** Regularly audit AI systems and use diverse, inclusive datasets to avoid bias.
- **Foster engagement and interaction**: Personalise communication to create more meaningful and interactive experiences.
- **Use AI for enhanced analysis**: Automate data processing to generate deeper insights more efficiently.
- **Support real-time feedback and adaptation:** Use dynamic surveys and real-time data analysis to respond quickly to evolving needs.
- **Promote the responsible and ethical use of AI**: Develop ethical guidelines for AI usage and involve community and stakeholder groups in the process.
- **Evaluate and iterate**: Start with small-scale projects, assess their impact, and continuously refine your approach.

Additional information

If you would like to learn more, access the full paper here.

vivwarrenconsulting.com
viv@vwc.net.au
+61 408 655 062