



What **Generative AI** means for Dutch media

Egon Verharen explains how NPO is aiming to harness GenAI while maintaining public trust

For NPO, generative AI opens up exciting new ways to create content and interact with its audience. But the Netherlands' public broadcasting organization is treading carefully..

Although it only really emerged in 2022, GenAI has already made it much easier and quicker to create all kinds of content from basic text to elaborate animations. *"Everyone is optimistic about telling their stories in different ways and different formats,"* says Egon Verharen, Manager of Innovation at NPO, who has been following the development of AI since he completed a PhD on intelligent agents and language technology in the 1990s. *"They can do things that they couldn't do before and we believe we can generate content more efficiently. But how far can we go before people start asking whether we still tell the right stories and whether they can believe the stories that we tell?"*

The answer to that question partly depends on the genre. Clearly, a drama, for example, can make extensive use of GenAI to create fictional dialogue and sets without misleading its audience. But news and factual programming is far more constrained. *"And then there are things in the middle that are really difficult, like, for instance, satire,"* notes Verharen. *"You don't want to tell people up front, that you are going to use GenAI*

to do satire. But you still have to be transparent afterwards."

With GenAI in its infancy, media organizations are still working out how these tools can be applied appropriately and responsibly. *"Sometimes, it's not knowing how to do it properly that prevents people from using GenAI,"* notes Verharen. Even with his experience and expertise, keeping up with developments in this fast developing field is challenging. *"The question that media organizations now face is what large language models can we trust and can we use?"* he says. *"And especially as a broadcaster that has all these public values, we want to know which open source models we can use? Which are trained on good material? Which data centers do they run on? Do they run on green energy?"*

The need for checks and balances

As a public broadcaster, NPO's primary mandate is to educate and inform, rather than to maximize revenues. *"We have to be trusted by the audience,"* observes Verharen. *"Generative AI can make up things: the models hallucinate, pixels are created and manipulated. So how can we use these technologies to tell our stories in a better and new way without losing the trustworthiness?"*

One of the core AI principles adopted by NPO is that AI-generated content doesn't get published without being checked and approved by a human. While NOS, the news broadcaster under the NPO umbrella and one of the most trusted brands in the Netherlands, doesn't employ GenAI tools to write news, it does use AI to translate a news story into a different language.

Transparency is another key principle. NPO flags to its audience when AI (or any software tool) has been used to create or adjust any content, such as a photo or image. It also plans to put "a provenance stamp" on its content so that the end user can check that nothing in the transmission or in the content of the messages has been manipulated by a

Exploring many different use cases

With such safeguards in place, NPO is exploring how to use GenAI in multiple different areas, from helping to develop content ideas to generating images, text and audio that can be used in programs. *"We've also experimented whether or not we can go from full text or script to video,"* adds Verharen. *"That's not there yet. It will work for very small clips, but not enough to make short form video and*

tell a story with public value. But we think it's coming."

To help it harness the advanced creative technologies employed in big budget science-fiction movies and sophisticated video games, NPO is employing a new virtual production studio. One of the first experiments in the new studio will be to create a backdrop for novice bands so that they appear to be performing in the Johan Cruyff Arena – a major stadium in Amsterdam.

Another experimental GenAI project at NPO is exploring how to anonymize people discussing highly sensitive topics, such as their involvement in prostitution. Dubbed "deep fake for good", the project uses GenAI to disguise the identity of an interviewee, removing the need to use actors or film the interview in the dark.

NPO has also used GenAI to generate images based on the contents of a podcast for people who are hard of hearing. At the same time, the technology is making it much easier and cheaper to make content available in multiple different formats. *"We developed a completely unique NOS news reader voice,"* adds Verharen. *"It's not a voice clone...it's the property of NOS, so they can use it for whatever they want."*

Keep copyright holders in control

Creating its own GenAI tools is helping NPO navigate one of the most contentious aspects in this field – the use of copyrighted content or the distinctive output of an individual artist to train the GenAI models that then go on to create text, images, music and software code. Although NPO is using GenAI to clone the voices of some of the presenters it employs, it won't use the resulting audio without the individual's permission.

To ensure copyright is respected, Verharen believes artists should be asked explicitly whether their work can be used to train a GenAI model. The artist could then negotiate a fee for authorizing the model to produce content without impinging on their copyright. He says that artists are increasingly realizing that GenAI could be used to help them become more productive, for example, by enabling them to produce voiceovers in multiple languages.

Teaming up on technology development

Such pragmatism is also taking hold in other parts of the Dutch media industry. There is a growing realization that Dutch media organizations need to work together to develop key digital technologies and platforms, if they are to compete effectively with the major US entertainment conglomerates for consumers' attention, according to Verharen. *"We have come together and said, we want to compete on content, but not on anything else,"* he explains.

However, with GenAI the line between content and technology can be blurred. *"If you use AI, or you develop a model together, is that neutral technology or are you using that to generate the content with which you compete and thereby, fine-tuning the model your way?"* Verharen asks. *"Model training is on the border. Is it part of the content that you want to generate or part of the neutral technology that you want to use?"*

Still, he is calling on Dutch media organizations to work together to build Dutch-language foundational models to underpin GenAI tools. *"Those public models for Dutch are just missing or not good enough,"* Verharen explains. *"And we'd like to play a part in that. But we're just really small. There's no interest from*

big tech companies in the Dutch market or generating specifically Dutch models. We can only do that for Dutch, if we work together with the industry."

When will GenAI be ready for prime time?

While they grapple with such questions, Verharen and his counterparts at other media organizations have to contend with the fact that GenAI is still immature, with models literally changing week by week. *"That's a problem for a stable industry,"* he notes. *"You need some of these good foundation models that are fixed and stay the same to provide reliable services. We are not there yet."*

At the same time, a wide range of ethical and legal issues need to be resolved before a public sector broadcaster, such as NPO, can fully embrace GenAI. *"It will develop very rapidly and faster than we've seen in previous technology cycles,"* he concludes. *"But we have to realize that we're just into the development stage and we still have to find lots of answers."*

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the following contributors who have been pivotal in the completion of this interview.

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