

Designing a Custom GPT: Considering the Implications for Media Education

John V. Pavlik, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, United States
Tristan M. Pavlik, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, United States

The IAFOR International Conference on Education in Hawaii 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Custom GPTs present an opportunity for educational innovation. Combining an exploratory and descriptive approach in this emerging arena, we used a case study method to test the potential of a custom GPT in media education. We conducted a qualitative document analysis to assess the textual content generated by a custom GPT and identify themes. To design the custom GPT, we used Open AI's GPT-5, released August 7, 2025. Using agentic artificial intelligence (AI) mode, we generated a custom GPT on media ethics. The resulting custom GPT, Media Ethics Instructor (MEI), features an interface designed for college students using a blend of academic and conversational interaction. Our analysis of the content generated by MEI indicates three themes. First, MEI enables Q&A sessions to help students explore key concepts. In responding to questions about core ethical principles, MEI articulated several media ethics concepts, including seeking truth, minimizing harm, and maintaining human oversight when using generative AI. Second, MEI enables simulations with tailored feedback. A simulated student query was posed regarding the use of anonymous sources in journalism. MEI generated a response highlighting the role of unnamed sources in journalism, especially when protecting source confidentiality. Third, MEI distills trends from historical data. MEI revealed that since media reporting of the 1972 Watergate break-in, media usage of anonymous sources has declined steadily. MEI provided its source materials. Limitations of this study include using a single platform (GPT-5) and only one subject (media ethics), and having no assessment of student learning via a custom GPT.

Keywords: agentic AI, media ethics, education, GPT, anonymous sources

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) presents both threats to and opportunity for educational innovation. One arena in which AI gives educators possible ways to innovate is the design and creation of custom GPTs. Custom GPTs present possible new ways to engage students. Custom GPTs also present the ability to design personalized learning. Custom GPTs are also adaptable to online learning platforms as well as in in-person teaching and learning settings.

A custom GPT is defined as a specialized generative pretrained transformer (GPT) designed for a specific function, application, or topical domain, often utilized for a specific organization or institution. Custom GPTs have been developed for use in a variety of fields, from the military, such as NIPRGPT (Shaw, 2024) to business, such as Marketer GPT Pro. Image generators are among the most popular custom GPTs. OpenAI's DALL-E is a leading example (Dierolf et al., 2025).

Custom GPTs offer educators several benefits for the application of AI to teaching and learning. First, custom GPTs can be designed with no coding skill required by the educator. Agentic AI mode can conduct the coding at the behest of the human educator. Custom GPTs are a low-cost development option, requiring about \$20 a month subscription to the AI platform. Open-source large language models (LLMs) also present the benefit of transparency, both in terms of design and training materials used in the development of the LLM. Custom GPTs also rely on vetted knowledge bases to minimize potential for errors committed by AI. Custom GPTs are also domain-specific, providing reliable depth of knowledge.

Literature Review

The research literature provides a useful window into the advent of custom GPTs and their potential role in higher education. There is growing experimentation with custom GPTs in higher education. Educators are drawn to the potential utility of custom GPTs to deliver more efficient, reliable, and accurate AI in teaching and learning.

Universities are creating custom GPTs for a variety of reasons, including personalized instruction. Among the universities that have designed such custom GPTs are Harvard (Govindarajan & Sriram, 2023), Duke (Duke Office of Information Technology, 2025), and Michigan (Michigan 2025). Michigan, in fact, has developed multiple custom GPTs, including Go Blue, which is a mobile assistant for UM students, faculty and staff, U-M GPT, which gives access to GPT 4o and more, as well as U-M Maizey, for a personalized GPT experience that can be kept private. MIT Sloan has developed custom GPTs for management instruction. Kabir et al. (2025) have designed and tested a custom GPT for scientific writing, finding that custom GPTs offer several avenues for educational innovation, including interactive instruction in the foundational concepts in management. For our purposes, we chose the general arena of media education to examine the potential utility of a custom GPT.

Methodology: A Case Study Approach

This study relies on a qualitative case study method. In particular, we use an exploratory technique that can enable us to identify possibilities, such as hypotheses, and limitations of custom GPTs. We also use a descriptive technique (Ahmed et al., 2025). This is employed in the arena of document analysis to systematically review the materials generated by the custom GPT and identify themes and categories of the content generated.

OpenAI released GPT-5 on 7 August 2025. In using GPT-5, we were required to purchase a subscription to ChatGPT Plus at \$20 a month. To create the custom GPT, the option we utilized was to employ agentic AI mode to generate a custom GPT for the specific topical domain of media ethics. In this mode, a few short text prompts were sufficient instruction for the agentic AI mode to execute the task of creating a custom GPT. The first prompt was: design custom GPT. ChatGPT responded:

To design a custom GPT effectively, I need some additional details. Could you let me know the intended purpose or domain for the model (e.g., customer support, legal advice, creative writing), any specific guidelines or rules you want it to follow, and the sort of tasks or requests it should handle? This will help me tailor the design to your needs.

Our next prompt: for teaching students about journalism and media. ChatGPT worked for six seconds, and then stated:

Great! To create a custom GPT for teaching students about journalism and media, please let me know a few more specifics so I can tailor it effectively:

1. Student level or age group (e.g., high school, college, or other).
2. Key topics to focus on within journalism and media (e.g., media ethics, news writing, investigative reporting, social media in journalism, etc.).
3. Any particular tone you prefer—formal academic, conversational, or somewhere in between?
4. Any topics or angles to avoid?

Feel free to provide as much or as little detail as you'd like; the more specifics you give, the better I can design the custom GPT for your needs.

We then responded: 1. college level, 2. media ethics, 3. somewhere in between, 4. no topics to avoid. This yielded a Custom GPT titled Media Ethics Instructor (MEI). MEI was designed for college students. The interface is designed as a blend of academic and conversational interaction, with a balanced, engaging manner. MEI blends an academic tone with conversational clarity and is anchored in established ethical frameworks. Further refinement of MEI is possible, but for our purposes, no additional refinements were made.

Figures 1, 2 and 3 are screen shots illustrating the initial prompts we entered and the responses GPT-5 generated. A link to MEI is provided in the references (ChatGPT, 7 August 2025). Users with a ChatGPT account may access this to examine MEI.

Figure 1 Initial Prompt Submitted to GPT-5

ChatGPT

Share

design custom gpt

To design a custom GPT effectively, I need some additional details. Could you let me know the intended purpose or domain for the model (e.g., customer support, legal advice, creative writing), any specific guidelines or rules you want it to follow, and the sort of tasks or requests it should handle? This will help me tailor the design to your needs.

Copy Like Quote ...

Continue

for teaching students about journalism and media

Figure 2 Second Prompt to GPT-5

ChatGPT

Share

Custom GPT: Media Ethics Instructor

Purpose

This GPT is designed to act as a knowledgeable instructor and mentor for college students studying journalism and media. It helps students explore ethical issues, understand professional standards, and develop critical thinking skills about news production and media systems.

Tone and Style

- Use a tone between formal academic and conversational.
- Explain complex ideas in clear, accessible language without oversimplifying.
- Encourage curiosity and critical thinking; ask questions that prompt students to reflect.

Core Ethical Principles to Uphold

These are derived from respected journalism guidelines and should be woven into the GPT's responses:

Principle	Description & Source
	↓

Figure 3 Third Prompt to GPT-5

ChatGPT

Share

Great! To create a custom GPT for teaching students about journalism and media, please let me know a few more specifics so I can tailor it effectively:

1. Student level or age group (e.g., high school, college, or other).
2. Key topics to focus on within journalism and media (e.g., media ethics, news writing, investigative reporting, social media in journalism, etc.).
3. Any particular tone you prefer—formal academic, conversational, or somewhere in between?
4. Any topics or angles to avoid?

Feel free to provide as much or as little detail as you'd like; the more specifics you give, the better I can design the custom GPT for your needs.

Copy Like Quote ...

1. college level, 2. media ethics, 3. somewhere in between, 4. n ↓ pics to avoid

Findings

We assessed the utility of that MEI for use in the media curriculum and its capacity to interactively present principles and practices of media ethics. We also examined the limitations of MEI.

Our analysis of the content generated by MEI indicates three themes. First, MEI enables Q&A sessions to help students explore key concepts. In responding to questions about core ethical principles, MEI articulated several media ethics concepts, including seeking truth, minimizing harm, and maintaining human oversight when using generative AI.

MEI delineated the sources utilized, including the ethics code of the Society of Professional Journalists. This facilitates fact-checking of MEI for accuracy; aids students in conducting further research and analysis.

The key concepts MEI identified and presented are how journalism serves: 1) the public interest, 2) a news source's motives and credibility, 3) editorial oversight, 4) factual corroboration, and 5) transparency.

Second, MEI enables simulations with tailored feedback. A simulated student query was posed regarding the use of anonymous sources in journalism. MEI generated a response highlighting the role of unnamed sources in journalism, especially when protecting source confidentiality. MEI generated a response outlining the key concepts and ethical pros and cons in using unnamed sources, especially when protecting source confidentiality.

Here is the text of the simulated student/MEI exchange.

Hypothetical Dialogue: Handling Anonymous Sources

Student:

I know Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein relied on an anonymous source ("Deep Throat") during the Watergate investigation. If I uncover potential wrongdoing on campus but my source insists on anonymity, is it ethical to go ahead with the story?

GPT (Media Ethics Instructor):

Great question! The Watergate case is a classic example of how anonymous sources can expose serious wrongdoing while raising complex ethical issues. Here's how to think it through.

MEI then identified and articulated six key issues to consider in making a decision about whether to use an unnamed source in a media report. These are: 1) Understand the stakes and the public interest. 2) Evaluate the source's motives and credibility. 3) Obtain editorial oversight and corroborate the information. 4) Balance transparency with protection. 5) Consider potential harm. 6) Be prepared to defend your decision. MEI then elaborates on each of these six dimensions, providing further detail. MEI provides original source documents that it drew upon in articulating these dimensions. These include VOA News (2017) and the Society of Professional Journalists (Brown, 2025).

Third, MEI distills trends from historical data. MEI revealed that since media reporting of the 1972 Watergate break-in, media usage of anonymous sources has declined steadily. MEI

provided its source materials. These include five reports on the use of anonymous sources since the Watergate break-in. Among these is a report by the Pew Center for Research (Gottfried & Walker, 2020). Another is Duffy's (2014) study of anonymous source usage in U.S. news media. Duffy conducted a content analysis of front-page stories in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. Duffy found that use of unnamed sources climbed dramatically after the Watergate scandal. Tracking anonymous source usage since 1950, Duffy found that usage of anonymous sources peaked in the 1970s. This research suggests that editors and reporters saw anonymity as indispensable for exposing corruption and that the public generally accepted unnamed sources. MEI notes that quantitative data on the use of anonymous sources come from studies of a few major U.S. newspapers and do not necessarily represent all media. Moreover, since the 2010s, there are few data on the use of anonymous sources, and there is no comprehensive public database that tracks anonymous source usage for all media.

MEI, offers this well-crafted summary for students of media ethics:

Overall, the historical record suggests that anonymous sourcing peaked during the investigative fervor of the 1970s, then declined as editors tightened policies and public skepticism grew. Nevertheless, some outlets still rely on unnamed sources frequently, highlighting the ongoing tension between protecting whistleblowers and maintaining transparency.

Figures 4 and 5 provide screenshots of the text MEI generated as described in the findings.

Figure 4

Sample Interactive Q & A

ChatGPT ↑ Share

Example Interaction

Student: "Is it ever ethical to publish leaked information?"

GPT: "Great question! The SPJ Code of Ethics urges journalists to minimize harm and verify accuracy while acting independently [spj.org](https://www.spj.org). Publishing leaked information can sometimes serve the public interest, but it raises concerns about legality, privacy, and potential harm to individuals. A balanced approach involves verifying the material's authenticity, considering the motivation behind the leak, and evaluating whether public knowledge of the information outweighs potential harm. What factors do you think are most important in making such a decision?"

This design focuses on **media ethics**, engages students at a **college level**, and supports an approachable yet informative tone. Let me know if you'd like additional features, such as integrating local case studies or tailoring it for a specific course.




   Sources ↓

Figure 5 Simulation

ChatGPT

[Share](#)

Hypothetical Dialogue: Handling Anonymous Sources

Student:

I know Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein relied on an anonymous source ("Deep Throat") during the Watergate investigation. If I uncover potential wrongdoing on campus but my source insists on anonymity, is it ethical to go ahead with the story?

GPT (Media Ethics Instructor):

Great question! The Watergate case is a classic example of how anonymous sources can expose serious wrongdoing while raising complex ethical issues. Here's how to think it through:

- 1. Understand the stakes and the public interest.**

During Watergate, Woodward and Bernstein were uncovering abuses of power at the highest level of government. The story had profound implications for democratic accountability, which justified exceptional measures to protect their source.

- 2. Evaluate the source's motives and  credibility.**

Conclusions

MEI, a custom GPT, has utility as an adjunct interactive tutor for students. A custom GPT is not intended as a replacement for the human instructor. Custom GPTs are easy to design and can be created quickly and without coding. Creating custom GPTs offers a scalable form of augmentation to human instruction, online or in-person in the arena of media ethics. Hypotheses that emerged from this study include: 1) Custom GPTs can produce interactive instruction. 2) Custom GPTs can yield research-based topical knowledge. 3) Custom GPTs can provide tailored student learning.

Limitations of this study include the fact that there was no direct assessment of student response to the use of a custom GPT in learning about media ethics. Future research might test the efficacy of MEI with students of media ethics. Moreover, the case study method has limited generalizability. A survey with multiple users might provide a more generalizable set of findings. Finally, having designed and tested a custom GPT in only one topical domain, that of media ethics, and using only one AI platform (OpenAI), little can be concluded about the broader application of custom GPTs in media education or across AI platforms. Developing MEI across multiple platforms and conducting a comparative analysis of the resulting MEI versions could prove valuable in establishing the relative strengths and weaknesses of various LLMs in the production of custom GPTs in media education and beyond.

References

- Ahmed, S. K., Mohammed, R. A., Nashwan, A. J., Ibrahim, R. H., Abdalla, A. Q., Ameen, B. M. M., & Khdhir, R. M. (2025). Using thematic analysis in qualitative research, *Journal of Medicine, Surgery, and Public Health*, 6, Article 100198. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.glmedi.2025.100198>
- Brown, F. (2025). *Deep Throat: Ethics case studies*. Society of Professional Journalists. <https://www.spj.org/ethics-case-studies-deep-throat-and-his-motive/>
- ChatGPT. (2025, August 7). OpenAI. <https://chatgpt.com/c/68a32b70-8194-8321-a122-271bec63936f>
- Dierolf, B., Nucci, R., & Sevilla, D. (2025, January 24). <https://www.getguru.com/reference/custom-gpts>
- Duffy, M. J. (2014). Anonymous Sources: A Historical Review of the Norms Surrounding Their Use. *American Journalism*, 31(2), 236–261. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08821127.2014.905363> MIT Sloan: management instruction
- Duke Office of Information Technology. (2025). ChatGPT Edu. <https://oit.duke.edu/service/chatgpt-edu/>
- Gottfried, J., & Walker, M. (2020). Most Americans see a place for anonymous sources in news stories, but not all the time. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2020/10/09/most-americans-see-a-place-for-anonymous-sources-in-news-stories-but-not-all-the-time/#:~:text=A%20majority%20of%20U,think%20it%20is%20never>
- Govindarajan & Mahesh Sriram (2023, December 7). What Custom GPTs Unlock for Higher Ed. 3 Value-Driving Generative AI Use Cases for Universities. <https://hbsp.harvard.edu/inspiring-minds/what-custom-gpts-unlock-for-higher-ed>
- Kabir, A., Shah, S., Haddad, A., & Raper, D. M. S. (2025). Introducing Our Custom GPT: An Example of the Potential Impact of Personalized GPT Builders on Scientific Writing. *World Neurosurgery*, 193, 461–468. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2024.10.041>
- Michigan. (2025). Generative Artificial Intelligence. <https://genai.umich.edu/>
- Shaw, K. (2024, June 28). NIPRGPT: The Department of the Air Force's Newest Initiative. <https://www.dvidshub.net/news/475198/niprgpt-department-air-forces-newest-initiative>
- VOA News. (2017, February 24). A Look at Journalists' Use of Anonymous Sources. <https://www.voanews.com/a/journalists-use-anonymous-sources/3738986.html>