

Headline: Hearst veteran discusses ‘defense and offense’ of AI with student journalists

Former Hearst CEO Frank Bennack Jr. sees a change coming to the media.

The journalism landscape has seen massive shifts in recent years. Newly popular “[creator journalists](#)” have established [trust](#) with audiences while confidence in legacy media [hit new lows](#). Major newsrooms like [The Washington Post](#), [CBS News](#) and [The Associated Press](#) have laid off workers in massive restructuring efforts. Declines in [advertising revenue](#) have led to the [shuttering of newspapers](#) across the nation.

Hearst was no stranger to these trends. In 2024, Hearst Magazines laid off [almost 200 workers](#) following more layoffs the year prior. Last year, A+E Global Media — which owns the channels A&E, HISTORY and Lifetime — went [up for sale](#). The company, partially owned by Hearst, did not find a buyer, and Bennack now denies any intention of selling the channels.

These are not the changes Bennack sees on the horizon. “The biggest change” yet to come, in his view, is artificial intelligence. To prepare for it, Bennack — now the executive vice chairman at Hearst — is banking on a principle that guided him at Hearst for decades: diversification.

In an interview with the writing finalists of Hearst’s 66th annual National Championships, Bennack expressed his goal of keeping Hearst multifaceted.

“Diversification in media has been critical to the success of those companies that are, today, still profitable and important,” Bennack said. Those companies kept their flagship entities — “vital newspapers, television stations, magazines” — while expanding into digital and business-to-business ventures.

In Hearst’s case, the company owns the credit rating and consultancy firm Fitch Group while also managing a number of medical information and service providers. At the same time, the company runs its front-facing operations, such as its 35 television stations, 80 newspapers and 200 magazines.

Bennack characterized the differing approaches to AI in each industry as playing “defense and offense.”

“We’re seeing early success in the utilization of it, that the best of it is yet to come, and many would argue the worst of it is yet to come,” Bennack said.

In April, Hearst Chief Data Officer Jessica Hogue [told Forbes](#) of plans to make the company’s data more “machine-readable.” On Monday, Bennack said AI “will create

opportunities for outreach that we haven't had before” while warning against the use of generative AI that would lead to the “degradation of content.”

Also in April, [Hearst announced](#) a unified network that would use “centralized data” to better connect advertisers with localized communities while also allowing them to operate at scale. Bennack described a new effort to use AI to assist in broadcast advertising sales.

However, not all of the company’s uses of AI have been without criticism. After Hearst hammered out a [deal with OpenAI](#) in 2024, the company came under fire from the Writers Guild of America East. The deal integrated work from all of Hearst’s journalism affiliates into OpenAI’s generative AI products. The Guild criticized the deal for lacking transparency and introducing the possibility of generated, plagiarized material.