MU-ICA 2025 conference *Human and digital mutualism: Code, Culture and Communication* opens new discourse at the intersection of academic and industry practice

Mahindra University's School of Digital Media and Communication (SDMC), in collaboration with the International Communication Association's (ICA) India Chapter, hosted its first conference on *Human and Digital Mutualism: Code, Culture and Communication*, marking an ambitious beginning for what promises to be a long-running scholarly tradition.

The Nov 21-22 event brought together leading thinkers from India, the US, and Hong Kong through six plenary sessions, an industry and academic panel, five technical sessions, a masterclass, and—for the first time in India—a curated documentary showcase.

Mutualism in the digital age

Mahindra University Vice Chancellor Yajulu Medury inaugurated the conference by reaffirming MU's commitment to interdisciplinary education and readiness for a future shaped by digital transformation. He traced the evolution of SDMC and the development of academic structures attuned to contemporary shifts in knowledge and practice.

Conference Chair and SDMC Founding Dean Shashidhar Nanjundaiah framed the theme by arguing that communication today is co-produced by humans, machines, and AI systems, making mutualism urgent amid rapid shifts across classrooms, newsrooms, and the media ecosystem.

ICA India Chapter Head Sanjay Bharthur highlighted the importance of scholarly networks and situated AI within a longer history of communication shaped by technological and infrastructural change, from the printing press to liberalization and colonial railways.

Former ICA President Noshir Contractor delivered the inaugural address, outlining his three-stage model of technological change—substitution, enlargement, and reconfiguration—while urging scholars to consider how AI might become a true partner in research and how to navigate the disruptions that accompany such reconfiguration.

Industry reflections and masterclass

Broadening the academic template, the conference featured an industry panel moderated by KV Kurmanath of *The Hindu Business Line*, who noted the sweeping impact of AI on everyday life.

Speakers Khalid Viqar (Google), Derek Ham (Carnegie Mellon University), Darryl Vaz (LTIMindtree), Manish Bhide (IBM), Rajat Ojha (Gamitronics), Rudra Kasturi (Times Internet), and Jay Barchas-Lichtenstein (Center for News, Technology & Innovation) reflected on themes ranging from creativity, transparency, governance, and risk to the growing importance of prompting, curiosity, and human oversight in journalism.

A masterclass by Jay Barchas-Lichtenstein and Prabhat Mishra examined AI in newsrooms, the limits of transcription tools, the need for public AI literacy, and the importance of transparency, drawing on the News User Needs Model to rethink the relationship between technical progress and journalistic responsibility.

Insights on new frontiers of creativity, identity, ownership, engagements, framing, and reshaped communication structures

Day 1 plenaries included Derek Ham, who argued for play as a fundamental driver of creativity and positioned AI as an accelerant rather than a replacement, and Sri Kalyanaraman from Michigan State University, who demonstrated how immersive storytelling deepens empathy and understanding through presence, imagination, impossibility, and interactivity.

The day concluded with three technical sessions: *Who am I, IRL?*, addressing identity and subjectivity across digital spaces; *Who's weaving the tangled web?*, exploring complexities of platform capitalism; and *Who's the generative generation, really?*, examining engagements with generative AI across age groups, ethics, and cultures.

Day 2 opened with a documentary showcase featuring five films that reimagined everyday life, belief, identity, ecology, and death. Four plenaries followed.

Sundeep Muppidi (University of Hartford) cautioned that mutualism can obscure asymmetries in human–algorithm relations and illustrated how broken mutualisms produce harmful feedback loops. Nishant Shah (Chinese University of Hong Kong) introduced "Narrative Change Practice" to understand Technology-Facilitated Gender and Sexual Violence, calling for proactive digital care-making grounded in regulation, oversight, mitigation, and transparency. Vibodh Parthasarathi (Jamia Milia Islamia) examined

platform governance through dislocations that destabilize legacy media systems, while Harsh Taneja (University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign) argued that technological globalization reorganizes rather than erases regional histories, with attention remaining deeply local despite global distribution infrastructures.

Two further technical sessions, titled *Who's framing our world now?* and *Who tells stories anymore?* explored how visual media frame culture, society, and the environment, and how journalism is being reshaped by algorithmic systems across production, circulation, and reception.

Reimagining media education

The academic panel moderated by Vinod Pavarala (University of Hyderabad) addressed the challenges facing media education amid AI and platformization. Ruchi Kher Jaggi (Symbiosis Institute of Media and Communication) highlighted the rapid evolution of media concerns and argued for curricula that treat platforms as epistemic environments. Usha Raman (University of Hyderabad) emphasized clarity of thought and ethical storytelling as enduring pedagogical anchors, while Sanjay Bharthur (Manipal Institute of Communication) pointed to the structural crisis in public media education. Shashidhar Nanjundaiah stressed that competencies, not skills, must guide learning, and that AI integration should be intentional and reflective. The sessions were well-attended, including a brief visit by MU Chancellor Anand Mahindra.

Forthcoming publication based on conference papers

A major scholarly outcome of the conference is in the form of an edited volume. To be published by Springer and co-edited by Shashidhar Nanjundaiah and Sundeep Muppidi, the book is in the proposal stage and has received a preliminary nod from the publishers. The book will featured selected papers from the conference. The editors are inviting full paper submissions before a final decision can be taken by editors and publishing house.