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Authorship in the age of artificial intelligence (AI): Ethics letter number four (4)

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ABSTRACT

The proliferation of artificial intelligence (AI) writing tools has fundamentally disrupted established conceptions of authorship, knowledge production, and scholarly responsibility across all academic disciplines. As AI systems grow capable of generating coherent academic prose, synthesising literature, and structuring arguments, scholars worldwide face urgent questions about the integrity of their intellectual contributions. This letter was itself produced using AI assistance, in a deliberate and transparent manner, for three purposes: first, to demonstrate that AI has reached a level of capability where it can meaningfully support substantive scholarly work; second, to model an acceptable and ethically responsible method of using AI in academic writing; and third, to accelerate the writing process by delegating minor technical roles including sentence construction, paragraphing, spelling, word choice, and formatting to AI, thereby freeing authors to concentrate on the higher order analytical, theoretical, and contextual roles where human intellectual contribution is irreplaceable. In writing this letter, Claude.ai was prompted to minimise AI typical phrasing and to identify and remove any content that risks perpetuating colonial assumptions or reproducing epistemological hierarchies harmful to knowledge systems from the Global South. The letter argues that AI does not eliminate the author; rather, it radically reconfigures authorship as a form of epistemic stewardship grounded in context, ethics, positionality, and intellectual judgement. Drawing on decolonial theory, epistemic justice frameworks, and Indigenous research methodologies, the letter contends that scholars from the Global South are especially vulnerable to the homogenising tendencies of AI generated text, which risks flattening situated knowledge, marginalising non-Western epistemologies, and reinforcing existing global knowledge hierarchies. A human and AI collaborative model is proposed, repositioning the scholar as the central epistemic authority who governs meaning, ensures contextual integrity, and fulfills ethical accountability. The letter further argues for reforms in peer review and editorial processes to distinguish between linguistic fluency and genuine conceptual depth and advances a new proposition that scholars from the Global South must not remain passive consumers of AI but must actively contribute to its development and disrupt its colonising potential at all levels of society.

KEY TERMS: *artificial intelligence, authorship, epistemic justice, decoloniality, Global South, Indigenous epistemology*

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INTRODUCTION

The landscape of academic writing has undergone a profound transformation in recent years, driven by the rapid development and widespread adoption of large language models (LLMs) and AI powered writing assistants across all scholarly disciplines. Tools capable of generating structured academic prose, summarising bodies of literature, and constructing arguments at scale have moved from experimental curiosity to mainstream academic utility within a remarkably short period, raising questions that extend well beyond convenience or efficiency to the very foundations of what it means to produce knowledge, claim authorship, and bear intellectual responsibility. Long-standing assumptions about authorship hold that the author is the originator of ideas, the producer of text, and the entity ultimately responsible for the knowledge claims advanced under their name. The emergence of AI writing tools destabilises each of these assumptions simultaneously, and if authorship is hollowed out in this way, what becomes of scholarly responsibility, intellectual integrity, and the ethical commitments that undergird legitimate knowledge production? These questions are not merely philosophical abstractions; they have concrete implications for publication ethics, peer review integrity, institutional accountability, and the protection of non-Western and Indigenous epistemologies, given that AI systems are trained on vast datasets that disproportionately represent knowledge produced in the Global North, encoded in English, and structured according to Western academic conventions (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2021), creating conditions in which AI generated text about communities and knowledge systems of the Global South risks reproducing epistemic harm under a veneer of scholarly fluency. This letter makes a sustained argument that the current age of AI does not diminish the importance of authorship but intensifies it and proposes a human and AI collaborative model to guide responsible AI use across all scholarly disciplines.

THEORY

Decolonial theory has been adopted in this letter. From a decolonial perspective, authorship is not merely an issue of individual ownership but is deeply tied to questions of whose knowledge is recognized, valued and legitimized (MacArthur, 2022). Hence, AI systems which are largely developed and trained using data from the Global North, risk reinforcing Western-centric understandings of authorship while marginalizing African and other indigenous knowledge systems that are often communal, relational and orally transmitted. This raises concerns about data colonialism where knowledge from the Global South is extracted, digitized and used without proper attribution or benefit to the originating communities. Applying a decolonial lens therefore allows the African Independent Ethics Committee to challenge dominant ethical frameworks and advocate for more inclusive models of authorship that recognize collective contributions, ensure epistemic justice and incorporate African philosophies such as Ubuntu. Considering the foregoing, let us look at eight propositions on authorship in the age of AI below.

Eight propositions on authorship in the age of AI

Building on established scholarship in epistemic justice, decolonial theory, and Indigenous research methodologies, this letter advances eight propositions that together constitute a reconceived understanding of authorship appropriate to the current age of AI. These propositions are not mutually exclusive but are intended to be read as a cumulative and interconnected argument applicable across all scholarly disciplines.

Proposition 1: Authorship is shifting from text production to epistemic stewardship

The mechanical act of writing, that is, arranging words on a page to produce coherent prose, has always been the least intellectually significant dimension of authorship. What matters in scholarly knowledge production is not the production of text per se but the governance of meaning: the selection of research problems, the adoption of theoretical frameworks, the weighing of evidence, and the exercise of intellectual judgement in drawing conclusions. The author has historically been understood as the entity who originates ideas, gives them shape, and bears full responsibility for the claims advanced in their name. AI systems can now perform the mechanical dimensions of writing with impressive competence, but they cannot assume responsibility for meaning. The author therefore becomes increasingly defined not by what they write but by what they choose, judge, and take responsibility for. This repositioning of authorship as epistemic stewardship has precedents in other domains. The editor, the curator, and the teacher all exercise forms of authorship that are more about governance of meaning than about the production of original text. In the age of AI, the scholar joins this practice, becoming responsible above all for ensuring that the knowledge claims advanced in their name are accurate, contextually grounded, theoretically coherent, and ethically defensible. Critically, research by Noroozi et al (2025) demonstrates that the impact of AI in scholarly and educational contexts depends fundamentally on how clearly human agency, purpose,

and the respective roles of human authors and AI tools are defined; where these roles are left ambiguous, AI tends to supplant rather than support human intellectual contribution, underscoring the importance of the clear role delineation that this proposition advocates.

Proposition 2: Scholarly responsibility is intensified, not reduced, by AI assistance

A persistent misapprehension in public and institutional discourse about AI is that the use of AI tools reduces the author's responsibility for the resulting text. This letter argues the contrary: scholarly responsibility is intensified by AI assistance, because the author must now exercise vigilance not only over their own reasoning but over the outputs of a system whose processes are opaque, whose training data may be biased, and whose claims may be inaccurate or fabricated. The phenomenon of AI hallucination, in which AI systems generate confident but false claims, fabricated citations, or nonexistent statistics, represents a direct challenge to scholarly integrity (OpenAI, 2024). Authors who use AI assistance without rigorous verification of all factual claims, source attributions, and empirical data may inadvertently introduce errors or fabrications into their work. Ethical authorship in the age of AI therefore requires not only transparency about AI use but active verification of all outputs, critical engagement with AI generated interpretations, and willingness to override AI suggestions that do not meet scholarly standards. Omorogiuwa et al (2025) provide an ethical framework specifically addressing transparent use of generative AI in academic contexts, arguing that scholars have a duty to disclose how AI was used, to verify outputs, and to ensure that the intellectual substance of any published work is genuinely attributable to the named human authors rather than to the AI system that assisted in its production.

Proposition 3: Knowledge remains fundamentally situated and cannot be fully captured by AI

One of the most consequential limitations of current AI writing systems is their inability to produce genuinely situated knowledge. AI systems generate text by identifying statistical patterns in existing datasets; they do not have access to the lived experiences, relational contexts, community commitments, or historical consciousness that give knowledge its epistemic value in diverse research contexts around the world. The result is that AI generated text about communities or social contexts is inevitably a simulacrum, structurally similar to scholarly writing but lacking the epistemic substance that comes from genuine engagement with lived realities. Critical scholarship across many disciplines has long operated from an explicit awareness of situatedness: the acknowledgement that scholars speak from and about specific historical, cultural, and political locations, and that claims to a view from nowhere are both epistemologically unjustified and politically suspect (Haraway, 1988). AI systems cannot replicate this situatedness; they can only simulate it. The human author's responsibility is therefore to ensure that the situated character of their knowledge claims is actively preserved and protected in any AI assisted work.

Proposition 4: Scholars must actively protect contextual and Indigenous epistemologies

The vulnerability of scholars from the Global South and Indigenous communities to the epistemic risks of AI use requires specific and active protective strategies. These include the deliberate foregrounding of non-Western theoretical frameworks, the explicit acknowledgement of diverse intellectual heritages and scholars, and the critical interrogation of AI outputs that reproduce Western interpretive frameworks in contexts where they do not apply. Scholars working across regions and disciplines have developed rich methodological and epistemological innovations, including Ubuntu philosophy (Metz, 2007), African feminist theory (Mama, 2007), and Afrocentric research paradigms (Asante, 1987). These frameworks provide resources for grounding knowledge production in values, relationships, and experiences that AI systems cannot replicate. Scholars must actively draw on these and comparable frameworks from their own contexts not only to produce knowledge that is relevant to their communities but to resist the epistemological pressures that AI systems risk perpetuating when deployed without critical awareness.

Proposition 5: AI introduces risks of epistemic injustice through the homogenisation of knowledge systems

The tendency of AI writing systems to produce text that conforms to dominant conventions of academic style, argument structure, and theoretical framing poses a significant risk of epistemic homogenisation, that is, the gradual convergence of scholarly writing towards a single standardised mode of knowledge production that reflects the assumptions and preferences of the Global North. This risk is particularly acute for scholars who write in English as a second or third language, who use theoretical frameworks developed outside the Western academy, or who draw on knowledge systems that have historically been marginalised in international scholarly discourse. The irony is that AI tools, which might be expected to lower barriers to scholarly participation for researchers in

the Global South, may simultaneously increase pressure to conform to dominant epistemological norms. When AI generates text that obscures distinctive intellectual voices, replaces locally developed theoretical frameworks with Western equivalents, or imposes standardised argumentative structures on knowledge claims that are better expressed in other forms, it functions as a mechanism of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007) even when deployed with benign intent. Scholars must therefore resist the pressure to let AI writing tools define the terms of their intellectual participation.

Proposition 6: Scholarly voice and positionality remain essential markers of intellectual identity

Scholarly voice, that is, the distinctive way in which an author articulates their intellectual perspective, engages with their discipline, and positions themselves in relation to existing knowledge, is not a superficial stylistic feature but an epistemic resource. The erosion of distinctive scholarly voice in AI assisted writing therefore represents not merely an aesthetic loss but an epistemic one. Positionality, the scholar's explicit acknowledgement of how their social location shapes their knowledge production, has been a central methodological commitment in feminist, decolonial, and Indigenous research frameworks. The use of AI tools that standardise tone and structure may inadvertently suppress positionality, producing text that mimics a detached, universalised perspective that critical research has consistently challenged. All scholars using AI must take deliberate steps to preserve and express their positionality, ensuring that their distinctive intellectual identities remain visible in their published work. Noroozi et al (2025) similarly emphasise that human agency and pedagogical intentionality must remain central when AI is introduced into knowledge producing contexts, a principle that applies with equal force to the scholarly writing process across all disciplines.

Proposition 7: Peer review and editorial processes must adapt to distinguish fluency from conceptual depth

Peer review and editorial processes have historically relied, at least in part, on linguistic quality as a proxy for scholarly quality. The capacity of AI systems to produce highly fluent academic prose has fundamentally undermined this proxy. A manuscript that reads smoothly, uses technical vocabulary correctly, and follows standard argumentative structures may be largely AI generated, while a manuscript that is stylistically uneven but conceptually original may represent significant scholarly contribution. Journals and editorial systems must therefore adapt their evaluation criteria to prioritise conceptual originality, theoretical contribution, and contextual depth over linguistic polish. This adaptation may require changes to reviewer guidelines, the development of new evaluation frameworks that foreground epistemic substance, and institutional investment in reviewer training. Journals committed to knowledge diversity and epistemic justice are especially well positioned to develop and model such institutional practices, and the current moment offers an opportunity not only to respond to the challenges posed by AI but to advance evaluation frameworks that are explicitly aligned with pluriversal epistemological commitments. Omorogiuwa and colleagues (2025) provide a set of ethical guidelines that offer a practical starting point for journals seeking to develop transparent and consistent AI disclosure and evaluation policies.

Proposition 8: Scholars from the Global South must contribute to the development of AI and disrupt its colonising potential at all levels

While AI can now contribute meaningfully to academic writing and authors can leverage its capabilities to accelerate and enhance their scholarly work, scholars from the Global South must not remain passive consumers of AI systems designed and governed primarily in the Global North. The coloniality of AI, as Crowther, Mugumbate, Sharma, and Fox (2025) demonstrate, operates across the full lifecycle of these technologies, from the data on which they are trained and the design choices made by developers, through to the norms and conventions they reproduce in generated text. Disrupting this coloniality requires active scholarly intervention at every level of society. At the micro level, individual scholars must engage critically with AI outputs, embed their own knowledge frameworks and lived experiences into AI assisted work, and refuse to allow AI to flatten or displace their intellectual voice. At the mezzo level, universities, professional associations, and research institutions across the Global South must develop policies, curricula, and review frameworks that embed epistemic justice into the governance of AI use in scholarship. At the macro level, scholars from the Global South must contribute to the design, training data, auditing, and governance of AI systems themselves, advocating for representation in the international bodies and technology companies that shape how these systems work, ensuring that the full diversity of the world's knowledge systems is reflected in how AI understands, interprets, and generates knowledge. The development of AI is not a task for the Global North alone; it is a site of epistemic struggle in which the participation of scholars from all regions and intellectual heritages is not only welcome but

necessary. Importantly, scholars from the Global South must lead coordinated advocacy for equitable representation in global AI governance forums. This is critical to decolonising global standards and guidelines, ensuring they are informed by plural knowledge systems, contextual realities, and inclusive development goals.

A human and AI collaborative model of scholarship

The eight propositions outlined above converge on a vision of authorship that is neither technophobic nor uncritically enthusiastic about AI. This letter proposes a human and AI collaborative model of scholarship that positions AI as a powerful but subordinate technical resource, subject to the epistemic governance of the human scholar. The model comprises four interdependent layers applicable across all academic disciplines.

Layer 1: AI as technical support. At the first layer, AI functions as a technical support tool for tasks such as initial drafting, literature summarisation, structural outlining, grammar checking, and citation formatting. These tasks are valuable but epistemically peripheral: they facilitate the production of text without determining its intellectual content. Scholars may legitimately use AI assistance at this layer while retaining full epistemic and ethical responsibility for the outputs. Transparency about this use is not optional but a core ethical obligation, as articulated in the ethical framework provided by Omorogiuwa and colleagues (2025).

Layer 2: The author as central epistemic authority. At the second layer, the human author exercises full intellectual governance over the knowledge claims advanced in their work. This includes the selection of research problems and questions, the adoption of theoretical frameworks, the evaluation and interpretation of evidence, and the exercise of intellectual judgement in drawing conclusions. AI outputs are treated as drafts to be critically evaluated, substantively revised, and supplemented with the situated knowledge that only the human author possesses. No AI output is accepted without critical scrutiny. Noroozi and colleagues (2025) emphasise that the positive impact of AI in knowledge producing contexts is contingent on precisely this kind of intentional human agency and clear role definition between scholar and tool.

Layer 3: Contextual grounding and epistemic integrity. At the third layer, the author takes active responsibility for ensuring that knowledge claims are grounded in the specific social, historical, and cultural contexts from which they emerge. This includes the deliberate incorporation of non-Western theoretical frameworks and intellectual contributions, the explicit acknowledgement of positionality, and the critical interrogation of AI outputs that reproduce decontextualised or culturally inappropriate interpretations. This layer is the primary site at which scholars exercise their epistemic sovereignty.

Layer 4: Institutional safeguards and editorial integrity. At the fourth layer, journals, editorial boards, and academic institutions function as institutional safeguards of scholarly quality and epistemic legitimacy. This includes the adaptation of peer review processes to evaluate conceptual depth rather than linguistic fluency, the development of clear and consistent policies on the disclosure of AI use, and the active cultivation of review panels with expertise in diverse epistemologies and decolonial methodologies. Institutions across the Global South are well positioned to develop and model such practices. This four-layer model provides a practical framework for the responsible use of AI in scholarship across all disciplines, acknowledging the genuine utility of AI tools for facilitating scholarly production while insisting that such utility must be subordinated to the epistemic and ethical commitments that define rigorous scholarship.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOLARSHIP ACROSS DISCIPLINES

The arguments advanced in this letter have implications that extend across all academic disciplines, including the humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, health sciences, law, education, and engineering. In every discipline, AI tools offer genuine opportunities: the capacity to summarise large bodies of literature rapidly may help scholars who lack access to well-resourced academic libraries to engage more comprehensively with existing knowledge; AI assisted translation tools may facilitate the dissemination of scholarship in multiple languages; and AI tools for data analysis may support research in contexts where access to specialised analytical software or statistical expertise is limited.

Across disciplines, however, the risks identified in this letter are equally present. In the health sciences, AI generated descriptions of illness, care, and community wellbeing that are not grounded in local knowledge contexts may produce recommendations that are clinically or culturally harmful. In law and governance, AI generated analysis of regulatory frameworks may import assumptions from foreign legal systems in ways that distort local understanding. In education research, AI generated accounts of learning, pedagogy, and curriculum may reproduce Eurocentric normative assumptions that decolonial education scholarship has spent decades challenging.

The real-world examples included in this letter show that although AI can improve access and efficiency, its careless use runs the risk of warping knowledge, especially in situations where cultural distinctiveness and lived experience are crucial to comprehending social reality. AI-generated case assessments for example in social work practice may miss important socio-cultural factors like stigma, informal support networks, or community coping strategies, resulting in solutions that are technically sound but socially unsuitable. Similarly, local beliefs, resource

limitations, or health-seeking behaviors may not be taken into consideration by AI-generated disease preventive suggestions in public health.

Scholars in every discipline must therefore exercise the epistemic stewardship described in this letter, remaining the intellectual governors of their work and ensuring that AI assistance serves rather than supplants their analytical, interpretive, and critical contributions. Disciplinary associations, funding bodies, and journals across all fields are encouraged to develop governance frameworks that are adapted to their specific epistemological commitments and to the vulnerabilities of their scholarly communities.

Lastly, inclusive design must be embedded as a core principle within any human–AI collaborative system. It requires that technologies are intentionally developed from the outset to reflect the full diversity of human experience across ability, culture, language, gender, socioeconomic background, and context rather than being retrofitted after deployment. At its heart, inclusive design positions persons with disabilities and other historically marginalized groups not as passive end users, but as active co-creators in the design, testing, and evaluation of AI systems. Their lived experiences constitute essential knowledge, shaping technologies that are more responsive, contextually relevant, and equitable. In this way, inclusive design moves beyond accessibility as a feature to inclusion as a foundational ethic, ensuring that AI systems are not only functional, but just, representative, and truly human-centered.

CONCLUSION

The current age of AI presents scholarship with a fundamental challenge that is simultaneously epistemological, ethical, and political: the central question is not whether AI can generate academic writing, which it clearly can, but whether the knowledge produced with AI assistance retains the epistemic qualities that make it genuinely valuable, namely situatedness, relational grounding, contextual specificity, and the authentic voice of the scholar who takes responsibility for it, and this letter has argued through eight propositions and a four layer collaborative model that authorship must be reconceived as epistemic stewardship, encompassing the governance of meaning over the production of text, the intensification rather than delegation of scholarly responsibility, the active protection of situated and relational knowledge, specific vigilance in defending non-Western and Indigenous epistemologies, resistance to epistemic homogenisation, the preservation of scholarly voice and positionality, the reform of institutional evaluation processes, and above all the active participation of Global South scholars in shaping, governing, and decolonising AI itself, so that the future of scholarship in the age of AI depends not on whether we use these powerful tools, but on how we remain responsible for, and contribute to the conditions of, knowledge produced in our name.

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