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News Media, Narrative Authority, and the Global Ordering of Artificial Intelligence

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This article examines how mainstream Western news media structure global hierarchies of technological legitimacy in coverage of artificial intelligence (AI). Although AI circulates worldwide, its public meaning is shaped within a restricted geopolitical and linguistic sphere. Conceptualizing news discourse as a narrative infrastructure that organizes visibility, authority, and technological futurity, we analyze 43,027 English-language newspaper articles from the United States and Europe using computational text analysis combined with interpretive examination. The findings reveal differences in thematic emphasis and actor representation: U.S. coverage frames AI through innovation and economic leadership, European coverage emphasizes regulation and governance, and China appears as a hyper-visible but ambivalent rival associated with surveillance, geopolitical competition, and strategic threat. Actors from Africa and Latin America are largely absent or positioned as sites of implementation, risk, or developmental need. We conceptualize this exclusion as discursive stratification: a hierarchy of narrative inequality in which some actors are positioned as authors of technological futures while others appear as objects, recipients, or peripheral contexts. News discourse thus contributes to the global ordering of technological authority.

Keywords: global communication, narrative authority, AI news, technological governance, digital colonialism, epistemic inequality

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Artificial intelligence (AI) has become a central terrain through which contemporary geopolitics is narrated and contested, increasingly replacing Cold War referents such as nuclear capacity or fossil energy as markers of global influence and future control (Feldstein, 2019; Sayler, 2020). What is at stake is not only technological capability but also the authority to define what technology is, what it will become, and who it serves. The sociotechnical imaginary surrounding AI has shifted from fascination with technical performance toward disputes over governance, ownership, and benefit (Crawford, 2021). Recent political-economy work similarly understands AI not simply as innovation, but as a contested terrain shaped by unequal power relations, infrastructural concentration, and geopolitical struggle (Mügge et al., 2026). This concentration of allocative and interpretive power reflects what Ragnedda and Ruiu (2026) conceptualize as AI's inequality regime, in which visibility, value, and opportunity are redistributed through unequal structures of control. In this context, news media play a constitutive role. Rather than simply reporting developments, news discourse organizes visibility, legitimacy, and epistemic authority across geopolitical contexts, including thorough cycles of attention and hype that elevate specific systems, actors, and expectations as publicly salient (Bareis, 2026). Postcolonial scholarship reminds us that such narratives rarely operate neutrally, since they embed universalist assumptions while reproducing asymmetries in technological development and deployment (Mishra, 2020).

We begin from the premise that these asymmetries are not reducible to access or representation alone. They concern epistemic inequality: the patterned marginalization of certain voices, knowledge, and worldviews in the narration of technological futures. Accordingly, we conceptualize news not as a mirror of technological change, but as a narrative infrastructure: a discursive and institutional system through which AI becomes publicly legible and some actors are positioned as innovators, regulators, threats, or absences. In using the term infrastructure, we do not suggest that journalism forms part of AI infrastructure in the same material sense as data centers, models, or cloud architecture. Rather, mainstream news operates as a distinct, but connected infrastructure of visibility and interpretation, shaping how technological authority is imagined and distributed. This approach aligns with recent work showing how journalism stabilizes some repertoires of AI meaning while rendering others peripheral (Paganoni & Becerra, 2026).

One analytical concept explored in this article is discursive stratification. We use the term to describe a structured hierarchy of narrative inequality in which technological authorship and interpretive legitimacy are concentrated within a narrow geopolitical core, while other actors appear primarily as derivative users, objects of concern, or remain absent altogether. The empirical analysis therefore focuses on the patterned ordering of visibility and authority within Western AI news discourse. Concepts such as techno-imperialism and digital colonialism are therefore retained as broader contextual frameworks that situate the significance of the findings, rather than as claims carrying the same empirical weight as the analysis of discursive ordering. The article is less concerned with demonstrating the full global operation of extractive AI infrastructures than with showing how mainstream Western reporting defines who is recognized as entitled to narrate AI's futures. This distinction matters because AI futures are articulated differently in non-Western contexts, where technological solutionism is refracted through local histories of dependency, development, and political contestation (Cavalcante Silva, 2025).

Existing scholarship has examined algorithmic bias and the political economy of AI infrastructures (Couldry & Mejias, 2019). Communication research has also analyzed media framing of emerging

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technologies and journalism's role in shaping public understandings of innovation. These strands of work have only rarely been brought together to examine how routine journalistic processes, such as sourcing, thematic emphasis, and actor attribution, allocate narrative authority across geopolitical contexts. Even less attention has been paid to how Western news media, operating within a restricted linguistic and geopolitical sphere, construct AI as a global phenomenon while concentrating technological authorship within a limited set of actors and institutions. We address this gap by examining whether these patterns of informational ordering within media systems can be understood as discursive stratification: a structural condition in which the Global South is silenced not only through absence, but through the normalization of its nonauthorship in stories that define technological futures. Beyond documenting this pattern, we also ask what institutional and structural mechanisms of news production help explain it, and what this account suggests theoretically about the relationship between media systems and the global distribution of technological authority.

Methodologically, the article combines computational analysis, topic modeling, named entity recognition through Nexis Uni analytics, and interpretive reading to examine how AI is narratively constructed in English-language newspaper coverage published in the United States and Europe. The study does not aim to capture global media discourse in its entirety, nor to examine how AI is interpreted across Global South contexts. Rather, it examines Western reporting and the discursive conditions through which AI is narrated from a narrow geopolitical center. Throughout the article, references to "U.S. coverage" and "European coverage" refer to the publication location of the newspaper sources, not necessarily to the geographic object discussed within individual articles.

The analysis addresses four questions:

RQ1: How is AI symbolically constructed in U.S. and European mainstream media coverage?

RQ2: What geopolitical and ideological framings dominate these narratives?

RQ3: Which actors—corporate, geographic, and epistemic—are rendered visible or erased?

RQ4: How does this patterned distribution of visibility and narrative role allocation help explain the uneven authorship of technological futures in Western AI news discourse?

Through this inquiry, the article examines how mainstream Western news discourse organizes technological futures by distributing narrative authority unevenly across actors and regions. More specifically, it shows how AI is narrated through a differentiated but mutually reinforcing distribution of roles in which the United States is positioned as technological initiator, Europe as normative evaluator, China as strategic and discursive Other, and the Global South as structurally marginal to the authorship of technological futures.

Theoretical Framework

This article develops a relational account of how media discourse participates in the global organization of technological authority. While the framework brings together techno-imperialism, digital

colonialism, and discursive stratification, it does not treat them as analytically equivalent. The article engages most directly with discursive stratification as the concept through which the empirical material is interpreted, while techno-imperialism and digital colonialism are retained as broader contextual frameworks. These three concepts operate at different analytical scales: infrastructural control, economic extraction, and narrative visibility. Together, they describe how epistemic authority around AI becomes unevenly distributed and stabilized through communicative practices. Following Larkin's (2013) account of infrastructure as forms that enable circulation while organizing political and social life, we use the term in a differentiated sense: Infrastructures are not neutral supports, but shape mediation, visibility, and the conditions under which authority becomes publicly legible.

In this article, AI infrastructures refer to the material and institutional systems through which AI is built and deployed, including data architectures, platforms, models, and cloud systems. By contrast, news media are treated as a narrative infrastructure: a discursive and institutional system through which AI becomes publicly legible, politically meaningful, and hierarchically organized. Journalism is therefore not part of AI infrastructure in the same material sense as servers or computational resources; rather, it is a distinct, but connected infrastructure of visibility and interpretation.

Narrative infrastructure functions in three related senses. First, it is routinized: Recurrent sourcing practices, headline conventions, institutional news values, and circulation patterns make some actors repeatedly available as legitimate narrators of AI while rendering others less visible or authoritative. Second, it is distributive: It allocates visibility, voice, and interpretive authority across actors and regions, much as material infrastructures organize circulation, access, and dependence. Third, it is temporal: It stabilizes expectations about who is entitled to build, regulate, threaten, or receive technological futures. Discursive stratification names the unequal outcome of this infrastructure: a patterned separation of narrative roles in which Western corporations and policy makers are authorized as authors and evaluators of AI, China is rendered hyper-visible as rival and object of suspicion, and actors from Africa and Latin America remain largely outside technological authorship.

The future-oriented character of AI news is central here. AI coverage rarely concerns only completed technological events; it also narrates trajectories, expectations, risks, investment horizons, regulatory urgencies, and imagined publics. News discourse therefore operates anticipatorily. Ananny and Finn (2020) argue that news infrastructures embed expectations about future publics within journalistic systems, routines, and sociotechnical arrangements. This is especially relevant to AI coverage, where innovation, regulation, and surveillance function as future-oriented vocabularies: Innovation projects future value and national competitiveness; regulation anticipates future harm and institutional responsibility; surveillance imagines future insecurity and geopolitical threat. Uneven narrative authority therefore shapes not only how AI is reported in the present, but whose futures are made thinkable, desirable, risky, or peripheral.

Techno-Imperialism as Informational Centralization

Techno-imperialism refers to geopolitical dominance through the combined control of digital infrastructures and the narratives that legitimize them. Power operates materially through cloud

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architectures, algorithms, and proprietary platforms, and symbolically through media discourse that shapes public understanding of technological futures. This dual logic connects Said's (1978) critique of epistemic domination with the political economy of communication (Mosco, 2017) and contemporary analyses of data extractivism and algorithmic governance (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Miragoli, 2025; Zuboff, 2019). Technological authority is therefore never secured solely through technical superiority but also through the capacity to shape how technology is understood. In communication terms, this centralization is evident in sourcing hierarchies, thematic prioritization, and agenda-setting processes that privilege specific institutional actors while rendering others peripheral.

Recent work describes this configuration as techno-neocolonialism (Kponyo et al., 2024): AI infrastructures centralize both computational capacity and epistemic legitimacy within the Global North. AI becomes less a neutral innovation than a terrain through which sovereignty and modernity are negotiated. Media discourse stabilizes this ordering. U.S. coverage, shaped by techno-solutionism and market rationality (Morozov, 2013; Silva Neto, 2022), emphasizes innovation and leadership, while European discourse foregrounds governance and ethical oversight (Helbing, 2021). These contrasting narratives nevertheless share a common structure: Both situate technological authorship within Western institutional space and normalize its geopolitical centrality.

East–West distinctions reinforce this hierarchy. AI narratives frequently construct China as opaque and politically suspect (Wang et al., 2023), echoing Said's (1978) logic of othering and aspirational projections of desirable futures (Fazelpour & Magnani, 2025). Infrastructures thus carry historical power relations (Headrick, 1979; Mosco, 2017). When firms such as Google, Microsoft, and OpenAI dominate both technical systems and narrative framing, they enact what Kponyo et al. (2024) describe as dual colonization: control over production and imagination. The result is a communicative environment that obscures exploitative foundations (Couldry & Mejias, 2019), diffuses accountability (Raji et al., 2022), and normalizes hierarchy through apparently neutral technological forms (Ali, 2021). The present article does not claim to measure techno-imperialism directly; rather, the concept situates the geopolitical environment within which the discursive patterns identified in our corpus acquire significance.

Digital Colonialism as Informational Extraction

Digital colonialism specifies the economic mechanism underpinning techno-imperial ordering. It describes the asymmetrical appropriation of data generated in the Global South and monetized in the Global North (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Zuboff, 2019). Here, users are positioned not as epistemic subjects, but as sources of behavioral surplus (Kwet, 2019). The extraction of value from peripheral regions while accumulation occurs at the center reproduces classical colonial patterns (Milan, 2020), extending the stakes beyond privacy to informational sovereignty and participation in knowledge production.

AI systems trained on globally sourced data, but designed and owned within a narrow geopolitical core, reinforce these asymmetries. Described as digital imperialism (Nyaaba et al., 2024), these arrangements maintain unidirectional informational flows in which peripheral labor sustains the system while symbolic capital concentrates elsewhere (Casilli et al., 2024). Postcolonial critique situates this structure

within modernity's longer trajectory (Chakrabarty, 2000; Mishra, 2020), while communication scholarship cautions against treating Western media as universal reference points (Waisbord, 2019).

Digital colonialism operates through mutually reinforcing infrastructural, economic, and regulatory asymmetries. Frameworks developed in the Global North may become de facto standards elsewhere, constraining local autonomy while presenting dependency as development (Birhane, 2020; Ragnedda & Ruiu, 2025). Media discourse contributes to this extractive ordering by normalizing asymmetrical informational flows through routine frames that present concentration as efficiency and dependency as development. Here again, our corpus does not directly measure extractive processes themselves; digital colonialism provides a broader context for understanding why discursive exclusion and nonauthorship matter politically.

Discursive Stratification as a Visibility Regime

If techno-imperialism names broader structures of control and digital colonialism highlights asymmetries of extraction, discursive stratification interprets the ordering of visibility through which these inequalities become publicly legible. We use the term to refer to a structured hierarchy of narrative inequality in which some actors are repeatedly positioned as entitled to define AI's meaning, risks, and futures, while Global South perspectives remain marginalized, confined to derivative roles, or excluded from technological authorship. The issue is not simply underrepresentation, but patterned discursive ordering produced by linguistic hierarchies, editorial routines, and selective amplification that privilege Western epistemes while rendering others peripheral (Natale & Guzman, 2022). It is ontological as much as representational: who is recognized as a speaking subject rather than a data source (Spivak, 2023). In communication terms, this distinction appears through source attribution, quotation, prominence, and repetition. Some actors are routinely cited as experts and innovators, while others appear only as background or sites of application. Research on AI-related media hype further shows how journalistic amplification stabilizes particular technological actors as authoritative while marginalizing alternative voices (Bareis, 2026).

Affective differentiation reinforces this ordering. U.S. coverage tends to associate AI with innovation and disruption, Chinese systems with threat, and European narratives with ethical concern and regulatory caution (Ahmed, 2013; Helbing, 2021). These tonal differences distribute legitimacy unevenly across geopolitical actors and shape the boundaries of technological imagination. Discursive stratification can therefore be understood as the outcome of intertwined processes that authorize some actors to imagine technological futures while others appear only as labor, data, implementation sites, or risks. The concept directs attention to the mechanisms through which journalism structures global technological visibility and sustains inequalities in imagination and authorship (Nothias, 2020; Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021).

Methodology: Corpus and Mixed-Method Analysis

This study adopts a mixed-method design that combines computational text analysis with critical interpretive inquiry to examine how news coverage operates as a narrative infrastructure that organizes visibility and epistemic authority. Rather than treating computational methods as ends in themselves, we use them to reveal patterns of meaning, actor visibility, and narrative emphasis in AI news coverage. Articles

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were retrieved from the Nexis Uni database using a headline-level query: HEADLINE ("artificial intelligence" OR "AI"). This criterion ensured that AI was explicitly foregrounded as the primary discursive object. For each match, the complete article text and metadata were collected. Searches were restricted to English-language newspaper sources in the United States and Europe up to December 31, 2024. Limiting the corpus to English-language sources ensured linguistic comparability across the data set and reduced the risk of conflating discursive differences with translation effects, while also focusing the analysis on the Western reporting sphere through which AI becomes publicly legible in transnational news circulation. Restricting the corpus to newspapers further ensured institutional comparability across outlets and maintained focus on established journalistic gatekeeping rather than platform-native or social media discourse. A deduplication procedure based on identical full-text content retained only unique stories within each region.

The final corpus comprised 43,027 unique newspaper articles (9,684 United States; 33,343 European). The larger number of European articles likely reflects the broader number of English-language European newspaper sources indexed in Nexis Uni and should not be interpreted as evidence of greater substantive attention to AI in Europe. Here, "Europe" refers to the Nexis Uni regional source category used for corpus construction, limited to English-language newspaper outlets published in European countries rather than to EU member states alone or to articles about Europe as a topic. English-language publications from outside these two regional source categories were not included in the corpus. Throughout the methodology, "U.S. coverage" and "European coverage" refer to the region of publication of the newspaper source, not necessarily to the geographic object or actors discussed within individual articles.

A terminological clarification is necessary. We use "Global South" as a political-relational category rather than as a fixed geographic designation or a synonym for all non-Western contexts. In this article, the term refers primarily to actors and regions not positioned in the corpus as major AI powers, regulatory centers, or geopolitical rivals, with particular reference to Africa and Latin America. China is treated separately because Western AI news assigns it a distinct role: It is hyper-visible as a strategic rival and technological Other rather than marginal or silent. The corpus therefore does not simply oppose West and non-West; it organizes a differentiated hierarchy in which the United States, Europe, China, Africa, and Latin America occupy unequal narrative positions. Restricting the data set to headlines containing "AI" or "artificial intelligence" privileges what we term the discursive surface—the site where editorial priorities, symbolic framings, and institutional gatekeeping are most concentrated (Ittefaq et al., 2025). This headline-level restriction is methodologically deliberate, as headlines function as agenda-setting devices that crystallize editorial judgment and signal which technological developments are prioritized within news discourse. Although selection was headline-based, all analyses were conducted on full-text articles. This design used headlines to serve as a criterion for identifying AI as the primary discursive object, while enabling the analysis to capture broader narrative developments across the full article text.

To map this discursive surface, we combine three complementary strategies:

(1) topic modeling to identify dominant thematic structures,
(2) named entity recognition through Nexis Uni Analytics to trace actor visibility, and
(3) keyword and co-occurrence analysis to capture lexical and temporal patterns.

These computational techniques are integrated with qualitative interpretation to ensure that statistical regularities are interpreted within their broader political and cultural context.

Topic Modeling (LDA and cLDA)

Topic modeling was used to identify recurring thematic structures in AI coverage and to compare how these themes vary between the United States and European media. Using Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA; Blei et al., 2003), we examined both convergent narratives (similar coverage across regions) and contrastive narratives (divergent coverage).

Articles with high semantic similarity across regions (cosine similarity ≥ 0.7; Cann et al., 2025) were grouped to identify shared thematic patterns. A second contrastive corpus was constructed from semantically dissimilar articles (Euclidean distance ≥ 0.7; Salton et al., 1975) to highlight regional divergence.

Topic labels (Figure 1) were defined through manual inspection of high-probability terms and representative articles, and articles were subsequently classified into these themes using cosine similarity between article embeddings and predefined thematic vectors; the values represent the number and proportion of articles assigned to each theme.

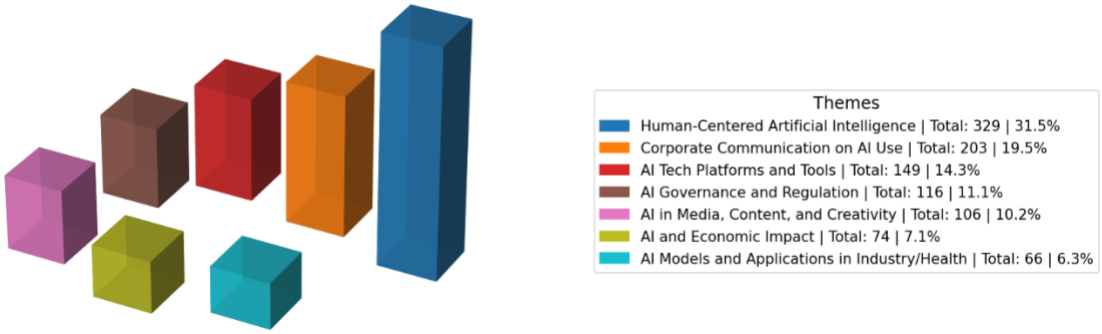

Figure 1. Distribution of thematic categories in the similar AI news corpus.

Figure 2 reveals that a significant portion of U.S.-specific topics centered on leadership, start-ups, and national security, whereas a larger proportion of European-specific topics emphasized regulation, ethics, and sovereignty. Bars to the right (positive values) indicate topics more prominent in U.S. coverage, while bars to the left (negative values) indicate topics more prominent in European coverage.

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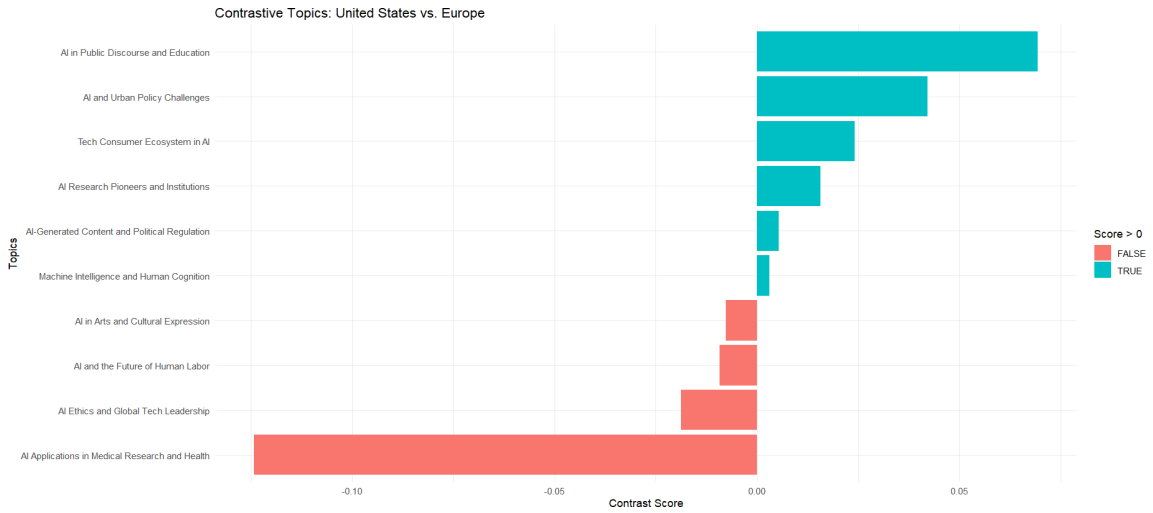

Figure 2. Contrastive AI topics: United States vs. Europe.

Named Entity Recognition Using Nexis Uni Analytics

To examine who is granted narrative visibility in AI discourse, we relied on Nexis Uni's built-in entity recognition system (Diakopoulos, 2019; Napoli, 2019). This approach ensures consistency across heterogeneous news sources and is particularly suitable for studying patterns of visibility and symbolic power (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Van Dijck et al., 2018). At the same time, reliance on a platform's built-in entity recognition system may impose its own classification constraints, even as it offers a consistent basis for comparing patterns of visibility across a large and heterogeneous corpus. The analysis shows (Figures 3 and 4) that U.S.-based technology companies (Google, Microsoft, OpenAI) appear significantly across both regions, while actors from Africa and Latin America are nearly absent (see also Ali, 2021; Bierman, 1979; Nyaaba et al., 2024).

Figure 3. Top mentions in the American AI news data set.

Figure 4. Top mentions in the European AI news data set.

Keyword salience was assessed through chi-square comparisons of 14 AI-related lexical stems across regions (Moon, 2023). These results capture differences in lexical frequency rather than thematic centrality. U.S. coverage disproportionately emphasized terms linked to innovation, governance, and security, while European coverage more frequently used terms related to dominance and geopolitics.

Table 1. Chi-Square Analysis of Keyword Stem Usage in AI News (America vs. Europe).

Stem	U.S. Count	Europe Count	Prop U.S.	Prop Europe	More Likely	χ^2	p-value
regulat	1802	5093	0.194	0.164	America	44.99	<0.001
ethic	1478	2721	0.159	0.088	America	390.73	<0.001
govern	2666	7681	0.287	0.248	America	58.53	<0.001
framework	589	1119	0.064	0.036	America	131.32	<0.001
account	1441	4101	0.155	0.132	America	31.78	<0.001
secur	1784	5031	0.192	0.162	America	45.59	<0.001
innovat	2172	5546	0.234	0.179	America	140.31	<0.001
corporat	733	1911	0.079	0.062	America	34.86	<0.001
state	3983	7604	0.429	0.245	America	1179.87	<0.001
domina	462	1906	0.05	0.061	Europe	17.39	0.00003
geopolit	73	343	0.0079	0.0111	Europe	6.82	0.009
power	3186	10294	0.344	0.332	America	6.89	0.043
inequal	134	494	0.0145	0.0159	Europe	0.94	0.333
threat	1469	4934	0.158	0.159	Europe	0.03	0.866

To capture temporal evolution, we applied rolling five-year windows across the data set. This revealed a marked inflection point in 2022, coinciding with the release of ChatGPT.

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Qualitative Interpretive Analysis

Computational findings were complemented with a qualitative analysis of selected articles to examine metaphor, agency attribution, and moral framing (Alashtary, 2024; Ramanathan & Tan, 2015). This interpretive step situates patterns of visibility and thematic emphasis within broader ideological formations.

Limitations and Reflexivity

This study operates within the constraints of English-language mainstream newspapers and computational tools that may flatten discursive nuance. Topic models impose probabilistic coherence on fluid narratives, and sentiment tools may miss cultural specificity. Accordingly, sentiment scores are interpreted comparatively rather than as absolute measures of emotional tone, serving to identify relative differences in affective orientation across geopolitical contexts rather than to quantify precise emotional intensity. Future research could extend this work through multilingual corpora and participatory approaches that amplify subaltern perspectives.

Results and Discussion

Divergent Narrative Framings

These findings show how AI news operates as a narrative infrastructure that distributes narrative roles across geopolitical contexts. U.S. media portray AI as a frontier of economic competitiveness and innovation. Terms such as "students," "start-ups," "tools," and "innovation" function as semantic anchors in articles celebrating American entrepreneurship and technological leadership. Topic modeling shows that a significant portion of U.S.-specific themes frame AI through future-oriented promise and national prestige, emphasizing leadership, start-ups, and security. By contrast, European coverage is more strongly organized around regulation, ethical constraint, and legal accountability at the thematic level. This orientation is also visible in headlines such as *The New York Times'* "Silicon Valley Looks to Artificial Intelligence for the Next Big Thing" (Hardy, 2016).

In contrast, a larger share of European themes focus on regulation, ethics, and sovereignty. Co-occurrence analysis shows that U.S. framings frequently pair with activation verbs such as "lead," "build," and "scale," reinforcing narratives of initiative, expansion, and economic sovereignty. This framing exemplifies the logic of cognitive capitalism, where data, algorithms, and technical expertise are valorized as new means of production (Fumagalli & Lucarelli, 2010). AI becomes not merely a tool, but a symbolic commodity, a "solutionist" asset embedded in acceleration and market expansion (Morozov, 2013; Silva Neto, 2022).

This celebratory posture reflects what Zuboff (2019) describes as surveillance capitalism, in which algorithmic systems are narrated as engines of progress while obscuring their extractive foundations. AI is thus framed as a frontier technology. By contrast, European media exhibit a distinct semantic ecosystem. Terms such as "ethics," "regulation," "human," "rights," and "sovereignty" appear across a larger portion of

European-specific topics and are often accompanied by modal verbs such as "must," "should," and "can," suggesting deliberation, uncertainty, and conditionality. Where U.S. news more often presents AI as momentum or inevitability, European news introduces a stronger register of anticipatory governance. This difference is consistent with broader European traditions of precaution and regulatory intervention, although our concern is to show how such orientations are articulated specifically within AI news discourse. Similarly, terms such as sovereignty should not be treated as semantically universal, since AI policy vocabularies can acquire different meanings across geopolitical contexts, including Latin American debates over regulation, labor, and development (Grohmann et al., 2025).

Lexical frequency should be distinguished from thematic centrality. Some governance-related stems appear proportionally more often in U.S. articles, as shown in Table 1, yet this does not mean that U.S. coverage is more regulation-centered overall. In the U.S. corpus, such terms are often embedded within narratives of competition, leadership, and innovation, whereas in the European corpus, regulation, ethics, and sovereignty are more likely to organize the thematic core. The difference lies not simply in whether these terms appear, but in the discursive function they perform.

Importantly, the European regulatory framing does not necessarily signal autonomy. The emphasis on regulating what others build points to a paradox. While Bradford (2020) highlights the EU's capacity to set global standards, this normative leadership operates alongside infrastructural dependence (Helbing, 2021). A *Financial Times* headline captured this logic succinctly: "Brussels Setting Rules for AI Isn't Pretty, but Someone Has to Do It" (Beattie, 2023).

These divergent discourses therefore do more than describe AI; they assign differentiated narrative functions, positioning the United States as a technological initiator and Europe as a normative evaluator, often through EU regulatory authority (Ali, 2021; Nyaaba et al., 2024; Said, 1978). The significance of the U.S.–European contrast lies not simply in divergence, but in complementary role distribution. U.S. coverage more often positions AI through origination, entrepreneurship, and strategic leadership; European coverage more often organizes AI through evaluation, governance, and normative oversight. At this stage, the evidence points less to outright exclusion than to a structured distribution of roles within AI discourse. The next section examines whether this structure changes when a major technological event reconfigures public attention.

Media Coverage and the ChatGPT Pivot

Between 2015 and 2022, the data set showed a steady rise in AI-related news, reflecting growing public and political interest. In late 2022, coinciding with the public launch of OpenAI's ChatGPT, a pronounced spike occurred: European news rose by 63% and U.S. news by 58% over the previous year. This "ChatGPT Pivot" marks an inflection point in AI's public visibility, rather than a wholly new discursive formation.

Pre-2022, AI appeared mainly as an infrastructural or industrial topic, embedded in conversations about automation, productivity, and surveillance. Post-ChatGPT, headlines increasingly foreground personification, immediacy, and societal impact. Words such as "talk," "learn," and "answer" entered the

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clusters, reflecting a shift from systems to personas, from AI as backend logic to AI as a publicly recognizable actor. This anthropomorphizing aligns with Ryazanov et al. (2025), who describe a move toward narrative personalization and emotional engagement, where AI is framed less as infrastructure and more as a visible social and narrative presence.

The ChatGPT Pivot thus did not generate a new discursive configuration; it intensified an existing one. This stabilization suggests that the differentiated roles observed in Section 4.1 are not contingent on topic salience alone, but are more structurally embedded.

Corporate Visibility and Discursive Exclusion

Patterns of actor visibility now indicate that the narrative structure identified earlier is not only differentiated but also increasingly concentrated around a narrow set of corporate actors. Our named entity recognition analysis using Nexis Uni analytics reveals a striking asymmetry in the symbolic visibility of global AI actors. Across more than 41,000 news stories (2005–2024), U.S.-based technology firms, such as Google, Microsoft, OpenAI, Meta, and Amazon, appeared in more than 61% of all articles, including those in European outlets. This dominance is both quantitative and discursive: These firms were consistently framed through aspirational language such as "innovation," "leadership," and "opportunity," positioning them as architects of AI's symbolic future. By contrast, Chinese companies such as Baidu and Alibaba appeared in only 8.7% of headlines and were statistically more likely to co-occur with terms like "surveillance," "espionage," and "authoritarian." These lexical asymmetries are consistent with techno-orientalist framing (Morley & Robins, 1992; Roh et al., 2015), where non-Western technologies are constructed as opaque, threatening, or ideologically suspect. This pattern is also visible in headlines such as *The Financial Times'* "Inside China's Surveillance State" (Lucas & Feng, 2018), where AI is tied directly to authoritarian monitoring and control.

Actors from Africa and Latin America were almost absent, collectively appearing in less than 0.5% of headlines. When they did appear, they were rarely framed as authoritative producers of AI futures; rather, they were positioned as sites of implementation, locations affected by technological change, or peripheral contexts within narratives defined elsewhere. An illustrative example is *The Financial Times* headline "Can AI Help Africa Close the Development Gap?" (Pilling, 2024), which grants Africa relevance primarily as a developmental problem-space to be improved through AI, rather than as a source of AI theory, governance, infrastructural authorship, or agenda-setting. This absence reflects a form of structural silence consistent with Fricker's (2007) notion of hermeneutic injustice: Dominant interpretive frameworks fail to render certain social positions intelligible. The issue is therefore not simply unequal visibility, but patterned nonrecognition. Marginality in AI news discourse is also a matter of peripheral positioning within a hierarchy of technological legitimacy, echoing accounts of technological peripheralization (Batteau, 2010). This configuration can be read as discursive stratification: a media system that renders the Global South primarily present as data, labor, implementation site, or developmental context, but largely absent as epistemic agent (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Nyaaba et al., 2024). Similar patterns of infrastructural inclusion without representational presence have been documented in platform expansion across the Global South (Nothias, 2020). This configuration also resonates with the recursive logic of digital colonialism. Data extraction and infrastructural dominance by U.S. corporations are naturalized through media framings that conflate

innovation with legitimacy. European firms, when mentioned, are usually framed in relation to regulation or compliance, reproducing the EU's symbolic role as normative custodian rather than technological originator. Within the discursive field examined here, symbolic authority to innovate remains concentrated in the United States, while Europe appears more frequently in a reactive regulatory role.

Together, these dynamics indicate a broader structure consistent with techno-imperialism, in which corporations exercise disproportionate influence over both AI infrastructures and the imaginaries through which they are narrated. In Bourdieu's (1991) terms, what is at stake is symbolic capital, the authority to define the stakes and futures of AI. The distribution of actors in the discourse therefore marks a movement from differentiated narrative roles toward more structured forms of exclusion.

Explaining the Pattern: Institutional and Structural Mechanisms

The patterns documented above raise a further question: what mechanisms produce this structured distribution of narrative authority, and what does it reveal theoretically about the relationship between media systems and the global governance of technology? Three converging mechanisms offer an explanation, none of which requires positing deliberate editorial intent to marginalize particular regions.

First, routine journalistic practice is structurally dependent on institutionally accessible and already-legitimated sources. Indexing theory holds that news organizations calibrate the range of legitimate voices to debates among recognized political and economic elites (Bennett, 1990), while classic sociology of news production shows that journalists default to sources that are organizationally efficient to reach, verify, and quote under deadline pressure (Gans, 1979). Because AI investment, policy debate, and infrastructural development remain concentrated in the United States and, secondarily, the European Union, these ordinary routines tend to reproduce U.S. and European actors as default narrators, independent of any individual editorial decision to exclude other regions.

Second, the global news ecology through which international stories are gathered remains structured by correspondent networks and source relationships historically concentrated in Western media capitals (Nothias, 2018, 2020). Events, expert commentary, and institutional actors originating in Africa, Latin America, and much of Asia are consequently less available to reporters as "newsworthy" raw material in the first place. The absence documented here is therefore infrastructural in origin, not solely a matter of framing or tone once a story is written.

Third, linguistic capital compounds both effects. Because English functions as the working language of transnational technology and policy institutions, English-language reporting draws disproportionately on English-speaking and disproportionately Western sources and experts, reproducing at the level of everyday sourcing practice the same hierarchy that Bourdieu (1991) identifies as a form of symbolic power.

Together, these institutional, infrastructural, and linguistic mechanisms suggest that discursive stratification is a recurring and potentially self-reinforcing outcome of ordinary news production rather than the outcome of deliberate exclusion by individual journalists or outlets. Theoretically, this indicates that the

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global ordering of technological authority is sustained less by overt gatekeeping than by the routine, low-visibility convergence of institutional dependency, infrastructural asymmetry, and linguistic hierarchy, a finding that extends indexing theory (Bennett, 1990) and postcolonial media sociology (Nothias, 2018, 2020) from domestic and general foreign-affairs reporting into the specific case of a fast-moving, futurity-oriented technology beat.

Leadership Narratives and the Authorization of Voice

The asymmetry identified at the corporate level extends to individuals. Named entity analysis reveals a concentrated set of predominantly male Western figures dominating AI coverage. Figures such as Elon Musk, Sam Altman, Sundar Pichai, and Joe Biden are consistently portrayed as visionary leaders, disruptors, or stewards of digital sovereignty. These representations approximate Weber's (2009) model of charismatic authority, adapted into a techno-leadership archetype where legitimacy derives from futurism, risk-taking, and symbolic proximity to innovation. Authority here operates discursively: Individual figures become narrative anchors through which technological futures are collectively imagined.

In contrast, Chinese leaders such as Xi Jinping and Ren Zhengfei are framed through suspicion, opacity, or geopolitical threat. This disparity reflects Said's (1978) logic of Orientalism, where the East appears not as a speaking subject, but as an object of Western interpretation. Techno-orientalist tropes frame Chinese technological capability as secretive or authoritarian, converting sentiment into geopolitical positioning.

More revealing, however, is the absence of alternative speaking subjects. Individuals from the Global South rarely appear. The issue is therefore not only about uneven portrayal but also about uneven authorization. While Western actors are positioned as narrators of technological futures, others appear, when present, as sites of implementation, labor, or risk. In Spivak's (2023) terms, the subaltern is not simply unheard, but structurally unpositioned as a speaker (Alahmed, 2020).

This distribution of narrative authority corresponds to broader accounts of AI coloniality, where data and labor circulate globally, but authorship remains concentrated (Tubaro et al., 2025). Even when Global South innovation is acknowledged, it is more likely to be framed as localized application than as generative technological imagination (Heng et al., 2022). AI discourse thus differentiates between those who design futures and those who are positioned primarily as their recipients or sites of implementation.

Rather than a uniform global conversation, the discourse forms a stratified communicative order. Western actors define stakes and trajectories, while others are positioned as contextual cases within those definitions. This dynamic aligns with Bourdieu's (1991) account of symbolic power as the authority to name and classify (Arun, 2020; Ragnedda, 2020). The question therefore shifts from visibility to audibility: not only who appears, but whose voice organizes meaning. The following section examines how this hierarchy is also expressed through distinct tonal orientations toward AI.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates the analytical value of examining how media discourse participates in the organization of global technological authority. Rather than treating news as a secondary reflection of innovation, the findings show that journalistic processes distribute visibility, legitimacy, and narrative authority across geopolitical contexts. In this sense, what we term discursive stratification does not operate through overt exclusion or censorship, but through patterned communicative routines rooted in institutional, infrastructural, and linguistic mechanisms of news production. Because AI is predominantly narrated through U.S. corporate innovation and European regulatory governance, alternative epistemic positions become structurally marginal within dominant frames. Following Couldry and Hepp's (2016) account of the mediated construction of reality, this dynamic points to patterned narrative exclusion: While the Global South remains materially embedded in AI supply chains and data economies, it is largely absent from the discursive architectures through which AI is publicly imagined and legitimized.

Across 43,027 news stories, the analysis shows that AI functions simultaneously as a technical system and a narrative order. Although U.S. coverage emphasizes innovation and economic leadership while European coverage foregrounds regulation and ethical oversight, both converge in privileging elite institutional actors as primary authors of technological futures. U.S. firms shape symbolic space through technical development and recurring media frames that define the terms of technological possibility, while European governance is more often articulated through standards, oversight, and normative evaluation than infrastructural production. In this configuration, the findings resonate with broader debates on techno-imperialism and digital colonialism, while speaking most directly to the patterned distribution of narrative authority captured by discursive stratification.

Discursive stratification can therefore be understood as a patterned failure of legibility rather than merely a deficit of representation. The findings reveal structured absence reinforced by repeated selection, prominence, and narrative centrality. As argued above, this failure of legibility can be interpreted through the convergence of source-indexing routines, the geography of news-gathering infrastructure, and the linguistic hierarchy of transnational technology discourse. Through these processes, AI becomes publicly intelligible within a limited institutional and linguistic sphere. Some actors are positioned as architects of the future; others appear primarily as data sources, sites of implementation, subjects of risk, or geopolitical objects. This is why news discourse is treated here as a narrative infrastructure: through routinized sourcing, headline selection, thematic emphasis, and actor attribution, it organizes who becomes legible as author, regulator, rival, recipient, or object of AI futures. The theoretical contribution of the study lies in specifying these mechanisms and showing that the global ordering of technological authority is an emergent property of ordinary news production rather than a residual byproduct.

The study contributes to communication research by showing how framing, sourcing hierarchies, and thematic emphasis shape the symbolic geography of AI. In doing so, the article advances communication scholarship beyond descriptive analyses of representation toward a structural account of narrative authority in global media systems.

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Several limitations warrant consideration. The reliance on English-language sources and computational methods reflects some of the exclusions examined here. At the same time, these limitations are analytically revealing, since the silences of the corpus illuminate the boundaries of dominant discursive systems. These mechanisms are theoretically grounded explanations consistent with the observed patterns rather than processes directly tested through newsroom data. Future research should examine non-Western media ecologies, multilingual corpora, and alternative journalistic traditions to assess how AI imaginaries are constructed beyond dominant narrative centers and how concepts such as leadership, sovereignty, and innovation acquire different meanings across geopolitical settings.

Understanding AI as both an infrastructural system and a communicative order suggests that debates about governance, innovation, and regulation cannot be separated from questions of narrative authority. If AI is to be understood as a global public issue, greater attention must be paid to the communicative processes through which technological futures are defined, stabilized, and contested. Media analysis is therefore central to understanding the contemporary global ordering of AI.

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