

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE, HUMAN PERCEPTION

Media discourse and public opinion in Italy and China

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Aula Magna, Campus Aresu, University of Cagliari

Abstracts and Speakers

Stephen Cave, University of Cambridge

AI: A Mythology

Discourse around AI is complex and contradictory; it spans multiple media and cuts across conventional distinctions such as fiction and nonfiction, news and speculation. This discourse embeds and perpetuates the values of the societies from which it stems, and shapes the decisions of actors across sectors, including engineers, users, and policymakers. For these reasons, we argue that narratives around AI are best understood as a mythology. To elucidate this, we offer a four-part definition of myth, showing how AI discourse meets these criteria. We then argue for the usefulness and importance of seeing narratives of AI in this way. Finally, we offer some examples of AI myths.

Stephen Cave is Academic Director of the Leverhulme Centre for the Future of Intelligence and Co-Director of the Institute for Technology and Humanity, at the University of Cambridge. He is co-editor of the volumes *AI Narratives* (OUP 2020), *Imagining AI* (OUP 2023) and *Feminist AI* (OUP 2023), and co-author with Kanta Dihal of *A Mythology of AI* (CUP, forthcoming 2025).

Fabio Ruggiano, University of Messina

What Italian school teachers know, think, would do about IA

The paper extracts a first and partial set of data from a questionnaire administered during 2024 among Italian school teachers that has received 217 responses. The questionnaire is made up of questions aiming at revealing how much Italian school teachers know about the IA systems and tools, what they think about them, whether they already use them in some way, how much and how they are willing to use them in their work in the future. The data will lead to a provisional picture of the current attitude of school teachers towards the new tools that have become available in the last few years.

Fabio Ruggiano is associate professor at the Department of Ancient and Modern Civilizations (DICAM) of the University of Messina. He teaches History of the Italian language and Italian linguistics. He collaborates with the Treccani society and with various centers of the Accademia dei Lincei. With prof. Fabio Rossi, he authored various grammars and textbooks for teaching Italian.

Kanta Dihal, Imperial College London

Imagining AI: How the World Sees Intelligent Machines

People have been imagining intelligent machines for millennia, in ways that vary greatly across cultures. While themes such as embodiment seem to be widespread and can lead to problems with understanding today's AI across the world, ideas of what constitutes an intelligent machine and

what its place in society should be are strongly dependent on cultural, national, and other contexts. Yet as artificial intelligence begins to fulfil its potential as a technology, spreading across the globe from its origins in 1950s America, many of these perspectives are marginalised. These stories, films, and visions matter: they are entangled in broader cultural attitudes and approaches to AI, reflecting or inspiring, embedding or disputing them. In this talk, based on the book *Imagining AI* edited by Stephen Cave and myself, I will introduce a history of such visions from across the globe, how they influence public perceptions of AI, and what they can tell us now that intelligent machines seem to be becoming a technological reality.

Kanta Dihal is Lecturer in Science Communication at Imperial College London, where she is Course Director of the MSc in Science Communication, and Associate Fellow of the Leverhulme Centre for the Future of Intelligence, University of Cambridge. Her research focuses on science narratives, particularly science fiction, and how they shape public perceptions and scientific development. She is co-editor of the books *AI Narratives* (2020) and *Imagining AI* (2023) and has advised international governmental organizations and NGOs. She holds a DPhil from the University of Oxford on the communication of quantum physics.

Colin Porlezza, Università della Svizzera italiana
Towards a Responsible Use of AI in Journalism?

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) in journalism has transformed the way news is produced, distributed, and consumed. However, the adoption of AI technologies also raises critical ethical questions. The presentation explores the challenges and opportunities associated with the responsible use of AI in journalism, focusing on issues such as transparency, accountability, and the impact of AI-driven decision-making on editorial independence and public trust. Drawing on recent research, the presentation will discuss whether existing frameworks – such as guidelines, human-in-the-loop systems, and transparency labels – are sufficient to mitigate risks or whether they require rethinking to ensure AI technologies align with journalistic values. Ultimately, the input seeks to reflect on how newsrooms can navigate AI innovation responsibly in an era of rapid technological change.

Colin Porlezza is Senior Assistant Professor of Digital Journalism with the Institute of Media and Journalism at the Università della Svizzera italiana (USI) in Lugano, Switzerland, where he also directs the European Journalism Observatory (EJO). He is also a Senior Honorary Research Fellow with the Department of Journalism at City, University of London, and a Knight News Innovation Fellow with Columbia University. He leads research at the intersection of digital journalism, innovation, and media accountability, focusing on the ethical implications of emerging technologies in journalism, particularly the use of artificial intelligence and automation. He has led several national and international research projects. He is also a Board member of the Swiss Association of Communication and Media Research SACM as well as a member of the Federal Media Commission COFEM.

Zhang Zhan, University of Nottingham Ningbo China
Shaping the Future of AI: The Discursive Power of Chinese Big Tech in Crafting China's AI Regulatory Framework

Since the release of the *Principles of Next Generation Artificial Intelligence Governance* by China's Ministry of Science and Technology in 2019, AI regulation has become integral to the country's internet governance framework. This framework emphasizes "safeguarding national security and social public interests" through digital sovereignty while increasingly acknowledging the protection of rights for organizations, corporations, and citizens. Chinese tech giants, as key stakeholders in domestic and global AI regulatory practices, face growing constraints under intensified government oversight, limiting their operational and international expansion capabilities. This paper examines

the shifting regulatory discourse surrounding AI in China from 2019 to 2024, focusing on the transition from a “development first” to a “governance first” strategy. Using a mixed-methods approach, it analyzes governmental policy documents and Chinese media coverage to explore the evolving narrative of AI regulation. The study highlights the increasingly marginalized roles and initiatives of corporate actors within this regulatory framework and examines the implications of China’s state-centric governance model for its global AI leadership ambitions, particularly amid ongoing international debates on AI ethics and regulation.

Zhang Zhan is currently an assistant professor in international communication and the International Liaison and Exchange Officer of the school of International Communication, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at University of Nottingham Ningbo China (UNNC). She received her PhD in Communication Sciences from Università della Svizzera italiana (Switzerland) and completed postdoctoral research at Annenberg School at University of Southern California. Her research focuses on media analysis, strategic and intercultural communication, technology and society, and China’s soft power in Europe.

Simone Natale, University of Torino

AI, agency, and power geometries

One of the paradoxes of AI is that it is a global phenomenon, but at the same time, it is always situated in specific, local contexts and cultures. While approaches that aim to study local cultures of AI are important, there is the risk of neglecting their insertion within the broader geographies and politics of AI. As a response to this challenge, I propose to apply the concept of power geometries, originally proposed by feminist geographer Doreen Massey, to the case of AI. Reframing the global dimension of AI in terms of power geometries helps locate these positions in the complex networks of relationships between different actors at global level. The power geometries of AI follow the lines and inequalities of the relationships between Global North and Global South, between colonizers and colonized, but also between diverse actors at different scales, such as governments, policymakers, corporations, designers, workers, and users. While all media can be examined in terms of power geometries, I argue that the power geometries of AI are characterized by the issue of agency. The reconfiguration of the question of agency sparked by AI, in fact, has generated new kinds of structures and trajectories underpinning AI’s power geometries.

Simone Natale is Associate Professor in Media Theory and History at the University of Turin, Italy, and Editor of the journal *Media, Culture & Society*. He is the author of numerous publications including his monograph *Deceitful Media: Artificial Intelligence and Social Life after the Turing Test* (Oxford University Press, 2021), which has been translated into Chinese, Italian, and Portuguese, and over 40 articles in international peer-reviewed journals.

Paolo Orrù

The Human-machine Relationship: Artificial Intelligence and Human Perception in Italian Newspapers

This study explores the evolving relationship between humans and artificial intelligence (AI) as represented in Italian news media. Drawing from a corpus of over 12,000 articles published between 2019 and 2023, the study identifies recurring themes and keywords in AI discourse, such as automation, privacy, ethics, and human-machine collaboration. The analysis reveals that media coverage often frames AI within utopian or dystopian narratives, portraying it as either a threat to human agency or a tool for societal progress. This duality reflects societal anxieties about automation, job displacement, and the ethical implications of AI. The findings indicate that Italian media discourse tends to adopt a balanced view, oscillating between caution and optimism. While

concerns about privacy and ethical dilemmas persist, media narratives also emphasize AI's potential to revolutionize industries such as healthcare, education, and energy. Ultimately, the study underscores the critical role of the press in shaping public understanding of AI technologies and their implications for human identity and societal transformation.

Paolo Orrù teaches Italian linguistics at the University of Cagliari. His main research interests are discourse analysis, corpus linguistics, the language of politics and teaching Italian as a second language. He is the author of several essays on the issue of linguistic discrimination of migrants, including the monograph *Il discorso sulle migrazioni nell'Italia contemporanea* (FrancoAngeli, 2017). He has also devoted several contributions to other forms of discrimination, particularly violence against women and femicide and anti-Southern discrimination.

Emma Lupano

Of Pride and Patriotism. The Representation of Artificial Intelligence in Chinese Official and Media Discourse

Artificial intelligence (AI) represents a pivotal topic in global discourse, given its far-reaching implications and transformative impact on human life. Nevertheless, the limited literacy among the general public means that national institutions and the media have a significant role to play in the construction of knowledge about this phenomenon. China's declared ambitions and achievements in the sector prompt exploration of the nation's AI institutional and media narratives, and of the overlap between the two. This study examines the discursive function of those narratives in the legitimation of the Party-State through a mixed-methods approach to frame analysis, aided by corpus linguistics tools. After looking at the themes and keywords pertaining to AI in institutional discourse, it analyses the themes and frames concerning AI that dominated the Chinese media discourse during the global AI coverage hype that followed the release of ChatGPT in November 2022. The study discusses the degree of alignment between the institutional and media discourse in framing AI as a fundamental component of China's national development and international status.

Emma Lupano is associate professor of Chinese language and culture at the University of Cagliari. Her research focuses on the intersection between the cultural and political aspects of contemporary China and their linguistic manifestations, especially in media discourse. Using a variety of approaches, including Applied Linguistics, Ethnography, and Translation Studies, she has authored two books on Chinese media and several essays that analyse the complex relationship between language, culture, and politics in China. She previously worked at the University of Milan, Peking University and the China Media Project of the University of Hong Kong.

Alessandra Melis

Debating the future of Chinese Artificial Intelligence on Social Media: An Analysis of Zhihu Users' Opinions

The present and future of AI are topics frequently discussed by Chinese netizens on the internet, social media, and platforms designed for debates and opinion exchanges, such as Zhihu—a highly popular Chinese social network and Q&A community website. This research primarily employs the method of experimental online ethnography, adopting a linguistic approach based on two selection criteria: questions addressing future aspects of AI and questions posed within six months following the publication of the Interim Measures for the Administration of Generative Artificial Intelligence Services. This study examines a corpus of 40 texts written by Zhihu users, focusing on questions about the future of AI.

The results derived from the analysis of the corpus suggest that official, scientific information on AI is increasingly accessible to Chinese netizens: the work done by government propaganda on general definitions and uses of AI services seem to have been “absorbed” by Chinese citizens.

Besides, a wide range of engaging opinions on the future of AI from Zhihu users emerge, suggesting that, compared to other Chinese social media and online platforms, Zhihu continues to serve as an important space for expression. Finally, the combination of its specialized and specializing nature, alongside its scientific and popular appeal, makes Zhihu a contemporary and influential tool for exploring Chinese citizens' attitudes toward specific issues.

Alessandra Melis is currently a Research Fellow at the University of Cagliari, where she is working on the project “Public Opinion on AI in China: The ‘Social’ Reception of Official and Media Discourse”. She obtained her PhD in “Storia Istituzioni e Relazioni Internazionali dell’Asia e dell’Africa Moderna e contemporanea” at the University of Cagliari (2012), with a dissertation on “The evolution of the Chinese family institution from 1911 to 2011”. Her primary research interests include the history of the Chinese family as an institution and the related social phenomena, both past and present. As an experienced teacher of Chinese language at various education levels, she is also currently investigating the use of new technologies in teaching Chinese to Italian-speaking students, with particular attention to learners with specific learning disabilities (SLD).

Stefano Rombi

Threat or Benefit? Unveiling the Political and Personal Factors Behind Italian Perceptions of AI

Artificial intelligence is rapidly transforming society, raising critical questions about its perception as a threat or benefit. This study examines how Italians perceive AI, focusing on the interplay between political variables (ideological orientation, political interest, and efficacy) and personal experience with AI-based technologies. Using data from a 2024 survey of over 2,000 Italians, the analysis reveals that while ideological orientation has a complex, nonlinear relationship with AI perceptions, its influence diminishes when accounting for respondents’ familiarity with AI and their willingness to use it at work. Personal experience emerges as the strongest explanatory factor, often outweighing political variables. These findings suggest that exposure to AI significantly shapes public opinion, highlighting the need for policymakers to consider both political attitudes and individual engagement with technology when addressing the societal impacts of AI.

Stefano Rombi is an Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Cagliari, where he teaches Political Science and Comparative Political Systems. His research focuses on electoral behavior, political parties, and the quality of democracy. Among his recent publications is the book *Sindaci nei social media. Comunicazione istituzionale e politica personalizzata* (Carocci, 2024), co-authored with Alessandro Lovari.