

Metodi e prospettive

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Studi di Linguistica, Filologia, Letteratura si propone di raccogliere e ospitare sia studi linguistici e filologici sia testi letterari e edizioni critiche di opere. Il progetto è basato sul principio metodologico della connessione diretta tra teorie e applicazioni nei campi della linguistica, della filologia e della critica letteraria. In tema di linguistica e filologia, la sezione accoglierà contributi nei diversi ambiti della linguistica funzionale (sincronica, diacronica, storica, descrittiva e applicata), della storia delle lingue e delle tematiche testuali e culturali degli studi filologici. Per la parte di letteratura proporrà, invece, testi di taglio criticamente innovativo e interdisciplinare, con attenzione particolare agli aspetti culturali dei processi letterari, all'ibridazione e alla problematizzazione dei generi, nonché alla edizione di testi inediti o dei quali si proponga una nuova visione critica.

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Artificial Intelligence and Human Perception

Media Discourse and Public Opinion

Edited by
Emma Lupano, Paolo Orrù

FrancoAngeli 

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AI Discourse and Public Opinion in a Global Perspective

Artificial intelligence matters for future human development, making it one of the most obviously global topics of our time. Even if private business and governments may prioritise competition and treat AI as just another commercial or political issue, it is difficult to name many other phenomena that – to date – are as pervasive and relevant to the entire human kind as artificial intelligence.

While it is necessary to consider studies that aim to reduce the hype around AI as a new medium and remind people of the need to maintain a balanced and well-informed attitude towards the phenomenon, it is undeniable that AI is, and will continue to be, a disruptive force in every aspect of our lives. Its positive development should be of everyone's concern, requiring truly global cooperation and mutual understanding to support reasonable and fair use. However, different national and cultural communities are likely to look at AI in different ways, and hold different hopes and fears about it, based on different imaginaries, values and beliefs. This prompts mutual enquiry and understanding of other perspectives to ensure effective global dialogue that foregrounds human benefit and interest above commercial or local ones.

One way to explore specific imaginaries is by looking at how a subject is narrated in a national, linguistic and cultural context. For decades, AI has been a focal point of academic inquiry particularly within disciplines such as Computer science and Information technology. However, its interdisciplinary significance is increasingly evident, having raised wide attention from the Social sciences, due to its economic, social, political, military, and geopolitical implications (Kellogg *et al.*, 2020; Natale, 2022), as well as from the Humanities, which have questioned its philosophical, ethical, and legal dimensions, and the cognitive challenges it poses for human existence (Floridi, 2022; van Diggelen *et al.*, 2023).

Only in recent years have the linguistic and discursive dimensions of AI started to be explored, especially in studies that focus on literary (such as science fiction) and media production (Cave, 2020; Chuan, Tsai & Cho, 2019; Giuliano, 2020). These works are rooted in the idea that the narrative around AI influences its future, as it moulds societal expectations and policy responses, affecting how technology is integrated into various sectors of society, and affecting public acceptance and trust, which are also essential for AI's successful implementation (Cave *et al.*, 2018).

It is well known that institutions and the media play a key role in this process, both shaping and being shaped by people's opinions. Political and institutional communication aims to convince and align citizens to policy goals, while attempting to influence media agendas in order to reinforce their own message. The media can or cannot embrace institutional messages, depending on their level of autonomy from the political power and on their ideological leaning. Nevertheless, public sentiment can influence both, in a circular dialogue. In the case of AI, because of its "black-box" features (Brauner *et al.*, 2023) and limited AI literacy, the institutional and the media discourse are likely to determine public opinion to a significant degree.

The aim of the research project that this volume stems from (funded by the European Union – NextGenerationEU and entitled "Artificial intelligence and human perception: media discourse and public opinion in Italy and China") was precisely to inquire this complex mechanism with a three-pronged approach: monitoring political-institutional communication on AI from a linguistic discursive point of view; investigating the discursive strategies employed in the narration and depiction of AI in media discourse; and analysing the emotions evoked and the level of understanding among the general population. The examination of both the production of knowledge (institutional and media discourse on AI) and its reception (public opinion on AI) within the same research framework represents a distinctive undertaking in discourse studies.

The ultimate goals of the project, and of this volume, are twofold: to challenge and enhance our understanding of artificial intelligence by showcasing the contributions that Humanities research can make to the analysis of its social and cultural impacts; and to promote more effective public communication about this disruptive phenomenon, through a critical reflection on the implication of media coverage on AI's key role in education, governance, human rights, and social equality.

This project was inspired by the strategic guidelines presented in Italy's 2022 National Research Plan (PNR), which urges the Humanities to address the issue of the human-machine relationship, explicitly calling

for an investigation of “representations, narratives, and images that shape human expectations and fears towards technological mediation, leaving a trace in the social imagination.” The extensive media attention around AI since the release of ChatGPT3 in November 2022 spurred for a timely interdisciplinary approach to the subject: as technologies related to artificial intelligence become more and more integrated into various aspects of daily life, it seems urgent to question what the public understands and feels about it, by using different analytical tools and by looking at diverse cultural environments.

The AI Act approved by the European Union in 2023 foregrounds the concept of an artificial intelligence that should be anthropocentric, respectful of people’s rights and privacy, and harmless to humans. In the view of the EU, its applications must not produce inequalities and must be designed and implemented in a responsible and transparent manner, so that it can respond to the challenges of society by guaranteeing security in all sectors. However, these preoccupations are not necessarily shared, or prioritised, by commercial entities that “make” AI, which are mostly driven by profit maximisation; or by individual nations that consider AI as part of their own strategic security interest at the social, political and military levels. In this complex scenario, expanding the range of possible narratives, reducing the utopian-dystopian approach, and broadening the scope beyond the national/European context to observe others appear essential to equip ourselves for a needed inter-cultural and inter-national dialogue on the future of AI.

This interdisciplinary volume aims to contribute to this goal by presenting studies regarding either the narrative or the reception of AI in different societies, offering a variety of perspectives on the subject, and paving the way for further and wider exploration in the field. The book is divided in two sections. The first revolves around the broad topic of *Media discourse*. The five chapters present similar methods and assumptions. They all adopt the analysis of the media as a tool to evaluate public perception about the developments in artificial intelligence. Newspapers are clearly a privileged source of investigation for the authors, while discourse analysis is the main methodological framework adopted in its various declinations.

The first chapter, by **Ionel Barbalau**, adopts an anthropological interpretative model to demonstrate how media discourse reproduces mythological and archetypal narratives. Open letters on the future of AI by prominent figures, enterprises, and “tech gurus” (like Elon Musk) are taken as a starting point for discussion on newspapers. Barbalau’s analysis demonstrates that these mythological frameworks are fundamental aspects

of the narrative architecture in AI media discourse. AI is depicted in a personalized and humanized manner, assuming heroic roles and exhibiting the ability to perform actions that can benefit or harm humanity.

The study presented by **Viseu, Pereira and Delicado** delves into how media discourses shape and disseminate visions of autonomous stores (AS) as a groundbreaking technological advancement in retail. Autonomous stores, characterized as AI-driven physical spaces enabling customers to collect goods without traditional checkout processes, are frequently portrayed as the ‘store of the future’ in media narratives. Media predominantly depict AI as a solution to the inefficiencies of conventional shopping, offering convenience through ‘frictionless’ experiences. Nonetheless, the analysis also highlights concerns about job displacement, data privacy, and increased surveillance.

The way Italian newspapers depict the development of Artificial intelligence in the years between 2019 and 2023 is the subject of **Paolo Orrù**’s contribution. Drawing from a large corpus of texts, the analysis highlights recurring themes and frames through means of discourse analysis and corpus linguistics methods, i.e. the analysis of keywords, co-occurrences of words (collocations) and text analysis. Among the most salient topics, such as the economy, sustainability, warfare, another key element of media narratives is the human-machine relationship. Although Italian journalists try often to adopt a middle way between utopian and dystopian narratives, the dualistic view is often present, showing how the public debate on AI is clouded by uncertainty and doubt.

Emma Lupano’s analysis looks into Chinese institutional and media discourse on the strategic employment of AI in the country. By means of a mixed-methods approach to frame analysis that uses corpus linguistics tools under a theoretical framework based on legitimacy discourse strategies, her contribution investigates dominant themes and keywords in institutional and media discourse(s) on AI. The study shows that, while some variability between institutional and commercial outlets does emerge, opening up space for genuine debate, AI in China is predominantly framed in positive terms. China’s achievements in the sector and AI’s fundamental role for the construction of a powerful country are widely highlighted, legitimising the party-state’s approach and stimulating a strong sense of national pride and patriotism.

The last contribution of the first part, by **De Masi, Di, Li and Song**, integrates critical discourse analysis of media content and a synthesis of public opinion data to explore how cultural, political, and economic factors influence narratives around these emerging technologies. The authors argue that Chinese media largely depict the Metaverse as a catalyst for

economic growth and social harmony, in line with state-led technological development strategies. Conversely, Western media focus on potential risks, such as privacy issues, social inequalities, and ethical dilemmas. The study emphasises the possibility of the rise of two distinct Metaverse ecosystems in the near future, each reflecting the peculiar approach of their respective regions.

This chapter provides an effective transition to the second part of the book, which is focused on *Public opinion*, through analyses that employ different tools and objects of study, such as opinion polls, social media, focus groups.

The chapter by **John Maina Karanja** explores the perception of the ongoing adoption of AI tools on public relations and strategic communication practitioners in Kenya. After outlining the current Kenyan situation of the PR market and its adoption of Artificial intelligence, the author analyses the perception of practitioners' through a series of semi-structured interviews. Participants were asked about the impact of AI in everyday practices and their opinion on key themes such as creativity, ethics, efficiency, and job security. The interviews show how new technologies are changing the profession by creating new routines, but concerns are raised with regards to ethics, data protection and job losses.

Eder and **Palhano Lhamby**'s analysis draw from the concept of "algorithmic folk theories" which are described as intuitive, informal theories people develop to make sense of the outcomes and effects of AI and new technologies. They conducted their study through interviews with two focus group discussions with ten Brazilians, undergraduate students between the ages of 21 and 23, to explore how young people in Brazil engage with AI: how they perceive, understand, and reflect on it. The aim of the two authors was to understand what intuitive, informal folk theories they form. Results suggest that familiar global narratives about AI are also present in the Brazilian context.

Gianluigi Negro's and **Alessandra Melis**' contributions both selected Chinese social media *Zhihu* as a platform for monitoring users' debate on Artificial intelligence. The social media functions as a Q&A platform allowing users to request information from an online community by posing questions. In his chapter, **Negro** illustrates the case of AI literature production in China through the analysis of *Land of Memories*, the first Chinese novel written through AI application to be awarded by a national literary competition. Negro confronts the official narration celebrating the achievements of China's technological development with comments on social media, hinting to a more sceptic view by normal users.

The essay by **Melis** employs discourse and linguistic analysis to investigate broader understanding and expectations on the future of AI through an explorative study on Zhihu. She firstly focuses on current main narratives conveyed by the Chinese government to later confront them with citizens' perception through the analysis of a set of Zhihu posts. The corpus of the analysis comprises 10 posts and some of the replies, containing a reference to the future in order to highlight attitudes towards AI. Notwithstanding pervasive State control, Zhihu appears to be relatively free. However, the debate among users in the corpus is almost always limited to purely technical aspects.

Alessandra Micalizzi's work is a multifaceted analysis involving various methods and sources to reflect on the impact of AI on creative production. The first part presents a qualitative content analysis on a sample of 33 Italian and foreign literary products that have used AI and its representation as one of the main characters. Then, Micalizzi presents the results of a survey on the perception of the relationship between creative production and artificial intelligence. The goal of the contribution is to highlight the continuity between long-standing imaginaries about technology and Artificial intelligence mediated by literature and nowadays perception by users on AI generated pictures.

Finally, **Stefano Rombi** reflects on another salient aspect on the current debate on AI: the political implications of its use and development and the possible impact of AI generated content on the future of democratic systems. The paper tests the possible correlation between political attitudes and perception of AI and its future among the Italian population. By analysing a vast survey on a representative sample of the Italian population, Rombi highlights how the relationship between the ideological orientation and the perception of AI is quite complex and nonlinear. Furthermore, first-hand interactions with AI significantly influence public opinion, sometimes taking precedence over political factors.

The present volume had two main objectives that we hope to have accomplished fully. The first among these goals was surely to offer a wide range of themes and methodological angles on the topic of perception and public debate on Artificial Intelligence. For this reason, the selected contributions address both broad discourses and more minute and detailed aspects, such as autonomous stores, public relations, creativity, literature, politics, institutional discourse. At the same time, the essays offer different methodological viewpoints (from qualitative and quantitative discourse analysis, to analyses based on opinion surveys; from content analysis, to interviews and focus groups) drawing from various scientific fields: anthropology, linguistics, sociology, political science etc.

The second fundamental aim of the volume was to gather contributions from a wide number of different countries and geographical backgrounds. AI is surely a global phenomenon, but the quality and quantity of its effects hugely differ from country to country and from continent to continent. While leading global actors, such as the United States and China, are driving innovation and technological advancements, other countries are deeply affected on various levels by its mainstream and massive adoption: growing digital divide; devastating effects on the work force, salaries and unemployment; the enormous amount of electricity needed to support data centres devoted to large language models and other applications cannot be discarded in the face of climate change, which strongly affects disadvantaged countries. Therefore, it was important to offer a rich perspective. With contributions spanning from four continents (Africa, Americas, Asia, Europe) and six States (Brazil, Usa, Portugal, Italy, Kenya, China), the volume also responds to the need of de-westernisation of communication research, in search of inclusion of different points of view.

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Emma Lupano
Paolo Orrù

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