

The Discursive Construction of AI Fears and Governmentality

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Abstract

This paper looks at AI tools and technologies as sociotechnical imaginaries. The term SI signals that technological developments are co-constructed by technical, design and political actors. This paper argues that this hegemonic truth in contemporary AI discourses is that development happens by default, and national capitalists should define the trajectory of this development. To do so, this paper analyses the AI solutionist tendencies of national governments and corporate actors and how they cause AI fears and anxiety in the Indian citizenry. This paper suggested moving from AI solutionism to AI democratization by adopting Small AI models over general-purpose AI. Overall, this paper analyses the role of ideas, discourse, and institutions in the AI governance policy landscape and contextualises AI technology development, regulation, and governance to reveal the impact of AI discourse on governmentality and individual liberties. Recognising the discursive nature of AI governance opens new possibilities for critique and transformation.

The theoretical approach of this paper involves contextualising the Western frameworks adopted to frame the arguments on AI imaginaries and AI democratisation. While the methodological approach involves a qualitative analysis of governmental and non-governmental policy documents concerning AI, popular English language newspapers and magazines, and digital social-political commentaries on AI futures.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence; Smart Hegemony; Discursive Institutionalism; Techno-democracy; AI governance, AI imaginaries, AI democratisation.

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Introduction

A spectre of totalitarianism looms large over geographies and national governments deliberating over AI regulation. The debates on internet freedom and minimal governmental interference in communicative technology development have moved way past the cyberlibertarian or techno-libertarian idealism. This paper argues that this hegemonic truth in contemporary AI discourses is that development happens by default, and national capitalists should define the trajectory of this development.

This paper looks at AI tools and technologies as sociotechnical imaginaries. The term SI signals that technological developments are co-constructed by technical, design and political actors. Overall, this paper analyses the role of ideas, discourse, and institutions in the AI governance policy landscape and contextualises AI technology development, regulation, and governance to reveal the impact of AI discourse on governmentality and individual liberties. Recognising the discursive nature of AI governance opens new possibilities for critique and transformation.

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Literature Review

The Handbook for Critical AI Studies (2023) is the main guiding text for the following work. AI tools and technologies are analysed as sociotechnical imaginaries. Jay M. Woodhams (2026) has analysed the discourse emerging from the “interplay between human agents, technological systems and social structures,” by viewing the LLM systems through the sociotechnical systems theory (p. 4). The LLMs suffer from “abstraction traps” due to their failure “to properly account for or understand the interactions between technical systems and social worlds” (Selbst et al., 2019, p. 60 as qtd. in Woodhams, 2026, p. 5). If the reasoning tools cannot tell if something is real or digital, the humans who form a dependence on these tools would naturally suffer from an epistemological failure to distinguish truth from untruth.

Vanessa Richter and others (2023), in their chapter “Imaginaries of artificial intelligence” from the Handbook inform their readers that the concept of “sociotechnical imaginaries (SI)” is born out of the confluence of analysis from science and technology studies (STS), social studies of science (SSS), social construction of technology (SCOT) and other interdisciplinary areas (p. 210). The term SI signals that technological developments are co-constructed by technical, design and political actors. In political theory, Benedict Anderson allowed thinking of the state as communal imaginaries and therefore, rested the power of the leviathan in the people doing the work of imagining (p. 10). Vanessa Richter and others further argue that imaginaries are not only limited to state actors, but “articulated and enacted by corporate actors, civil society, research communities, and other organized groups” (p. 211).

Sociotechnical imaginaries produced by corporate actors play a part in the development and use of RFID tagging, search engines, satellite imagery and big data solutions (p. 211). The adaptation of AI imaginaries in society is due to the persistent and concerted efforts of the various AI stakeholders. AI

stakeholders have effectively placed AI imaginaries in the public domain by downplaying the risks posed by AI and presenting it as a “comforting technological fix to structural societal problems” (Bareis & Katzenbach, p. 22 as qtd. in Richter et al., 2023, p. 214). For example, the ed-tech boom is due to the push for AI integration by educational technology companies.

Ayush Bhardwaj (2026) warns that when AI is suggested as a “necessary and unquestioned solution for a range of societal problems,” we experience AI solutionism. The idea of techno-solutionism or techno-fixes is well-known. Alvin Weinberg is credited for describing a technical fix as a technological solution for an issue that would have required a behavioural change in people. Technical fixes are temporary and, at times, unsuitable solutions. AI solutionism should be thought of as governments and corporate players pushing AI adoption and integration in fields and sectors where its requirement might not have been immediately felt or where its impact assessment is yet to be done. Bhardwaj further argues that it is often the case that AI tools require a fix of their own to function properly.

Another way to think of AI is to think of it as an *dispositif*. The term “*dispositif*” (used alternatively with *dispositive* or *apparatus*) comes from Foucault’s writings, where it refers to a “heterogenous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions” that together amounts to a “formation which has as its major function at a given historical moment that of responding to an urgent need” (DiscourseNet, n.d.; Gordon & Foucault, 1980). Federico Jose T. Lagdameo (2025) unpicks how AI functions as a *dispositif*: by gradually uncoiling its protocols of appropriateness that come to govern human communicability and intelligibility (pp. 10-11).

Lagdameo resorts to Foucault’s four-fold classification of technology in order to define what he labels as digital governmentality. In Foucault’s classification, technology may serve one or more of the following functions: (a) enabling the production or transformation of things (technologies of production); (b) enabling the usage of signs and symbols (technologies of sign); (c) objectification of the subject (technologies of power); and lastly, (d) allow individuals to perform certain operation on themselves to reach a desired stage of “happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (technologies of the self) (p. 5).

Byung-Chul Han (2017) criticises this *dispositif* of contemporary *technologies of the self* that make the individual think of themselves as a project-in-making. What Han calls the “achievement-subject” is a slave to an unknown master and works for an unknown cause. The constant drive to work on yourself, to (re)invent yourself, to not allow yourself to settle, to keep challenging yourself—among the many narratives that AI-enabled digital media users are constantly exposed to. A neoliberal subject, with full access to ICT available at his hand, is asked to look beyond the traditionally accepted horizons of human fallibility (Han, 2017). It is Foucauldian *care of the self* that has been turned over its head. Digital governmentality works in a discrete manner. Like Foucauldian governmentality is concerned less with the political structures or the administration of the state but with the selective *ordering* of the *conduct* of individuals, digital governmentality orders the conduct of individuals interacting with AI. LLMs, such as OpenAI’s GPT series, Google’s Gemini, Anthropic’s Claude, etc., produce an authoritative-seeming text- or image-based answer in response to a particular format of input prompt. Lagdameo’s key argument is that ChatGPT “does not simply process human input; it

anticipates and normativizes it,” and in that process, it manufactures the desired subjects (p. 9; p. 11).

In order to critically investigate the role of norms and institutions (pre-existing and newly emerging), Divij Joshi (2024) places AI governance in the larger context of technology governance, which involves “institutions of global governance, standard-setting organisations, and multinational technology firms” (p. 330). The discursive and non-discursive meet in technology governance to fulfil an *urgent need* created by the technological innovation (DiscourseNet, n.d.; Gordon & Foucault, 1980). However, the *urgent need* is not to curb the innovation but to provide an incentive for its continuation; the need is essentially the need to depoliticise AI, limit political imagination and thereby, prompting preferred political practices (Richter et al., 2023, p. 214).

Analysing legal constructions of AI in India, Joshi argues that an informational economy is taking root in India, one that institutionalizes particular forms of economic and political power (Joshi, 2024, p. 333). What Joshi learnt through several policy documents of the Government of India is that there is a serious apprehension towards regulation, Indian AI strategies are contributing towards the privatisation of crucial administrative and governance functions, and the existing mechanisms for the accountability of government procurement are insufficient to deal with the procurement of AI technologies and data-based analytics (Joshi, 2024, pp. 336-337). Yet these AI strategies are being portrayed by the Indian government as championing AI development and innovation in India. Joshi’s research is important for this paper because it directly addresses the *constructedness* of the AI governance norms and institutions.

This paper argues that AI strategies sketched out by state and corporate actors form a nexus of policy and discourse: a *dispositif* of “tech policy, national strategic positioning and an imaginary of public goods” (Bareis & Katzenbach, 2022; Richter et al., 2023, p. 215). In the next sections, we jot down the theoretical approach and methodology adopted for this paper to further this argument.

Theoretical Approach Adopted

The theoretical approach of this paper involves contextualising the Western frameworks adopted to frame the arguments on AI imaginaries and AI democratisation. There is a broad constructivist approach underlying the various sections of this paper. To talk about the AI imaginaries shaping the future of the technology and thereby impacting the futures of the current and coming generations, it is assumed that there are a plurality of contesting opinions and ideas, some more dominant than others, that aim to influence the development of the technology. The assumption prior to the research was that AI anxiety is not uniformly felt, and therefore, it makes little sense to use universal categories and constructs to discuss fears surrounding AI futures.

Another reason why the constructivist approach was adopted for this paper is to make it easier to engage with Discursive Institutionalism (DI). The role that Vivian Schmitt’s DI plays in this paper is to highlight how various existing institutions practice a form of power centralisation and bar new political and regulatory institutions from emerging. At a time when AI is being expeditiously adopted, its use and uptake for tasks traditionally performed by humans need to be closely monitored. DI allows for bringing to light the interplay of private-public forces that push for AI institutionalisation in society without dedicated AI assessment and monitoring institutions.

A Note on the Methodological Approach

A qualitative analysis of governmental and non-governmental policy documents concerning AI, popular English language newspapers and magazines, and digital social-political commentaries on AI futures was the methodology adopted for this paper from 2023 to 2026. A context analysis helps gauge the mood of the journalists and the public on the future that AI development and adoption present. A further analysis of AI policy documents highlights how AI fears or AI optimism is dealt with by policymakers.

To understand the instrumentalization of myriad socio-technical imaginaries to guide or misguide the development of AI systems and how, if at all, such imaginaries have differed for technologies preceding AI, we move to the next section.

Sociotechnical Imaginaries shaping AI development

The notion of sociotechnical imaginaries (SI) is contingent to the fact that technological development takes place within the broader context of society and international politics. The dominant ideas and debates in society at any point in time shape the development and adoption of technology at that temporal juncture. Sheila Jasanoff and Sang-Hyun Kim (2009) articulate this idea under the notion of SI to highlight: (a) the undeniable influence of shared narratives and imaginations on technological design; and (b) the instrumental role of technology in producing ordering regimes (Jasanoff & Kim, 2009, p. 120; Richter et al., 2023, p. 210).

States control people and societies through technology. The particular ordering regime that takes under its fold the institutions and associations of people imbue its ideology into the tech-design. The technology that emerges out of the state's attempt to control its citizens carries the values and the traces of the ruling ideology.

Jasanoff originally defined SI as “collectively held, institutionally stabilised, and publicly performed visions of desirable futures, animated by shared understandings of forms of social life and social order attainable through, and supportive of, advances in science and technology” (Jasanoff, 2015). Consequently, her definition of SI excludes individually or privately owned, not stabilised by institutions, and publicly feared technologies (Cave & Dihal, 2019, p. 7; Wang et al., 2025, p. 426). AI is one such technology that is more feared than desired. People fear AI because it is potentially going to make them jobless. AI has also made it easier to surveil, capture and imprison delinquents. Provided the fear and anxiety that AI has invoked, an inclusive definition of sociotechnical imaginaries should allow for “the possibility of ethical and political contestation of sociotechnical imaginaries,” as is suggested by Wang and others (2025) (p. 426).

By turning to sociotechnical imaginaries, we can engage directly with the ways in which people's hopes and desires for the future—their sense of self and their passion for how things ought to be—get bound up with the hard stuff of past achievements, whether the material infrastructures of roads, power plants, and the security state, or the normative infrastructures of constitutional principles, juridical practices, and public reason (Jasanoff 2012b). Technological systems serve, on this view, a doubly deictic function, pointing back at past cultural achievements and ahead to promising and attainable futures, or to futures to be shunned and avoided.

If fear of a technology persists, then what happens next is that it is subsumed within the preexisting sociotechnical imaginaries in a way that the need for the obliteration of that technology is made redundant. Jasanoff argues that nuclear disasters like Chornobyl and Fukushima did “arouse equivalent fear and revulsion around the globe,” but they were eventually “absorbed and integrated into preexisting imaginaries” (Jasanoff, 2015, pp. 30-31). SI have a cushioning effect for tech disasters. The *felt* need of the tech ultimately overcomes the fear and anxiety surrounding that tech.

Discursive Construction of AI Fears

The contemporary notions of «discursive construction» are inspired by the work of the protagonists of the third wave of constructionists, i.e., Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann. Their book *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966) remained hugely popular and inspired the 1990s generation of constructionists, who brought Foucauldian discourse theory to social construction and coined the term “discursive construction” (Keller, 2018, p. 10).

Such work led to some confusion about the rather loose use of ‘social construction’ and ‘discourse’ as more or less equivalent terms. Abbott (2001: 18) considered Berger and Luckmann as protagonists of the “third wave of constructionists” and stated that meanwhile, during the 1990s, the (‘fourth generation’ Foucauldian) term ‘discourse’ had replaced Berger and Luckmann’s reference to ‘symbolic universes’ as the core concept used to approach processes of social construction – though he also argued that the concepts were closely aligned and covered the same ideas.

The construction of AI imaginaries as optimistic, as opposed to the affective response that their presence in society has produced, is the cause of a disjunction between the state and its citizens. A study of AI by Wang and others (2025) through its reception and representation in 9 newspapers across the UK, China and India from 2011 to 2022, revealed that AI anxiety is endemic to the West (Wang et al., 2025, p. 247). How should the lack of AI anxiety in the non-West, or rather the Global South, be thought of? Is it an appropriate conclusion to draw? Are there no *felt* fears of AI’s takeover of jobs in India?

In their research, Wang and others focused on analysing 3 English-language newspapers (Times of India, Indian Express and Hindustan Times) for an 11-year-long timeframe to fully grasp the complexity and diversity of AI imaginaries in India, found that certain topical areas are more popular in India than in the other countries selected for the same analysis (China, the US and the UK). These areas are: AI-powered modern military, integration of AI in city management (CCTV cameras, etc.) and agricultural production, employment of the highly skilled workforce, sci-fi imaginaries in films, etc.

The discourse surrounding AI debates in India during the four years chosen for this paper, i.e., 2023 to 2026, mainly focuses on data sovereignty (DD News, 2025; Gohain, 2026; Krishna, 2023; Srinivasan et al., 2025; The Economist, 2023; The Hindu, 2023), resource consumption by data centres (FP Tech Desk, 2026b; Jha & Yousaf, 2026; Jha et al., 2026; Kabeer, 2026), probable job losses due to AI adoption (FP Tech Desk, 2026a; Maira, 2026; Sharma, 2026; Shukla, 2026), misinformation spread due to LLMs and GenAI (Bawa, 2024; Hajli, 2026; Kapoor, 2026; Pankaj, 2026; Simha & Athreya, 2026; Rodrigues, 2024; Thomas, 2025), and India’s unchosen AI tech race with China and the US (ANI, 2026; Ghani, 2024; Jayaraman & Sharma, 2026; Madhav, 2024).

From the above comparisons, it could be observed that AI fears struck India much after they were roaring in the West. Some of these fears belong to those blue-collar workers who are paid a little extra to wear head-mounted cameras used to record data to train future AI (AFP, 2026; India Today, 2026). They probably know that AI is going to make these skilled jobs obsolete, yet have no other option but to engage in this unfair quid pro quo or else the few extra bucks would go to other, more willing workers. A portion of these AI fears belongs to the elite bureaucrats and intellectuals who think India lacks a comprehensive AI strategy that will give Indians an edge over their Chinese counterparts (ANI, 2026; Ghani, 2024; Madhav, 2024). AI anxiety in India has a class structure to it. It should not be a surprise that it is the upper-class AI anxiety that is driving the AI revolution in India.

What should inform the Governmentality of AI Systems?

While contemplating what ideal mode of governmentality should rule and restrict AI systems, it is important to note here that a form of digital governmentality already exists; one that has the effect of “disciplining individuals and regulating populations under the guise of neutrality and efficiency” (Lagdameo, 2025, p. 1).

Mary Flanagan and others (2008) argue that even “conscientious designers” or “those who support the principle of integrating values into systems and devices” will naturally face hurdles, for the standard design methodologies lack the wherewithal of value integration in technology. Design methodologies are drawn to fulfil purely functional requirements; they would lead the conscientious designers to encounter two kinds of problems (p. 323) while attempting to integrate values into their design products or the end technologies:

(a) *The epistemological issue:* Value integration requires the designer to become acquainted with rather “far-flung areas of knowledge and know-how.” Philosophical expertise that value integration requires has to be learned by the designers. In Flanagan and others’ words:

When values are included as ends, alongside typical functionalities, designers must grapple with an extended set of variables, but more importantly, variables that lie outside their usual fields of expertise. Specifically, this means that design and engineering projects must incorporate contextual knowledge about values and, where such knowledge is not readily available, designers will need to grapple directly with questions about the relevant values. Not only does this lie outside the usual boundaries of engineering expertise -whether theory or practice - but is attainable through modes of inquiry, such as systematic analysis of values, unfamiliar in the technical and scientific environments. (Flanagan et al., 2008, p. 324).

(b) *The practice issue:* Even after it is determined what the designers need to know, to reliably integrate it into the design methodology in a way that it could be replicated by all designers is another challenge (p. 329).

Undoubtedly, the AI revolution is technicians, designers, computer nerds, etc., who lack the willingness or the wherewithal to internally regulate AI. In cases where AI is internally regulated, with a built-in kill-switch that prohibits it from undertaking unethical tasks, such as for Constitutional AI (the one designed by Anthropic, which is behind Claude AI), there are still issues, such as a looming democratic deficit and corporate sovereignty. The internal code of ethics for a Constitutional AI is

written entirely by tech companies, effectively taking over the power to define ethics (Abiri, 2024; Bai et al., 2022). When tech companies emerge as norm entrepreneurs, setting norms and deciding on ethical matters, argues Anette Zimmermann and others (2026), this is “democracy-washing.” They argue that corporate actors, by providing pseudo-democratic outcomes, such as a Constitutional AI, reject the normative goal of democratization (p. 5, p. 7).

People fear AI not because it remains vague and beyond comprehension, but because they can feel the constant and mediating presence of the technological *dispositif* that has emerged out of technologies precursor to AI, and the new *dispositif* that the assemblages of AI tech firms, state-industry-military complex, and the digital discursive spaces have enabled. Lagdameo (2025) argues that it is “through interface design, behavioural nudges, feedback loops, and the quiet promise of efficiency” that AI technologies function as a *dispositif*; the user of AI tools such as ChatGPT learns to discipline themselves in a certain way that reflects the linguistic logic of these technologies. While using AI tools, the user is “taught not only how to speak, what to expect, and how to remain within the bounds of the platform.” Lagdameo posits that it is not through coercion but by subtle nudges that the AI technologies reconstitute the desired self: the digital subject (p. 11).

From AI Solutionism to AI Democratisation

As digital governmentality reconstitutes the *self* as a digital subject, its dependence on AI tools and technologies grows. The *digital self* looks for more AI tools to *care for its self*. AI solutionism intervenes in the self-formation processes of individuals, leaving them forever in need of LLMs to communicate and to sound intelligent. Bhardwaj (2026) unpicks how AI solutionism reduces complex socio-political problems to technical fixes. Elite bureaucrats believe that AI will assist in solving the persistent postcolonial problems of health, education and agriculture in India. AI solutionism leads to the belief that AI integration is a pressing need and should be fulfilled at the cost of not accounting for the democratization of AI.

Proponents of AI solutionism risk dismissing the crucial AI democratization process for the misguided belief that “democratizing AI involves unique, outsized, indeterminate, or otherwise special challenges” (Zimmermann, 2026, p. 3). Anette Zimmermann and others (2026) label this issue as “AI exceptionalism.” AI is thought of as too advanced or too different compared to all other tools and technologies. Being too different from other areas of science and technology, it cannot be governed, regulated or democratised like other areas of science and technology can be (p. 4). Indeed, opacity and explainability are a challenge to AI’s democratization. Zimmermann and others present the following argument: “to democratize the measurement of thick concepts like algorithmic fairness, the relevant value-judgments should ideally be made through a legitimate and representative political process rather than by a small group of unelected corporate decision-makers” (p. 4).

Techno-democracy and Small AI

Peter Bloom and Alessandro Sancino (2019) argue that techno-democrats promote ‘democratic’ citizen and their democratic abilities to vote, protest, and practice dissent. Technology can revolutionize what is meant by democracy: expanding its practice and by whom it is practised. As part of the techno-democratic requirement, this paper propounds the idea of a Small AI. Small AI are those AI

systems that are designed to fulfil limited and specific purposes. Being limited in the tasks they perform, Small AI models require a smaller set of training data. While Small AI models might not be completely free of risks, they perform better than general-purpose AI models in terms of transparency and accountability. Small AI benefits include a reduced “environmental costs, opacity, bias, hallucinations, and the concentration of power among a handful of actors” (Jain et al., 2026).

Conclusion

This paper analysed the AI solutionist tendencies of national governments and corporate actors and how they cause AI fears and anxiety in the Indian citizenry. AI solutionism should be thought of as governments and corporate players pushing AI adoption and integration in fields and sectors where its requirement might not have been immediately felt or where its impact assessment is yet to be done.

AI fears in India are stratified along class lines. Elite bureaucrats in India prefer data accumulation for training AI systems that will eventually make a section of India’s population jobless. Corporate interests manifest in powerful AI imaginaries which depoliticize AI development and AI adoption. Sociotechnical imaginaries of AI make it easier for AI fears to be absorbed. Corporate actors, by providing pseudo-democratic outcomes, such as a Constitutional AI, reject the normative goal of democratization. Constitutional AI runs into problems such as corporate sovereignty and democratic deficits. This paper suggested moving from AI solutionism to AI democratization by adopting Small AI models over general-purpose AI. Small AI are those AI systems that are designed to fulfil limited and specific purposes. With access to a restricted dataset, they do not endlessly accumulate personal and non-personal data.

Declarations

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by the author. Ethical approval was therefore not required.

Conflict of Interests

The author of this paper has no conflict of interest to disclose.

Authors' Contributions

The author solely conceived, designed, and researched news articles, performed the analysis, and wrote the manuscript.

Declaration of Generative AI-powered Tools in the Process of Writing

The author declares that he has not used AI-powered tools in writing and formulating various stages of this study.

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