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Artificial Intelligence Governance Discourse: A Textual Analysis of English Materials Related to the AI Act

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Abstract

Purpose – The The study examines how the European Union constructs AI governance discourse through English-language materials related to the AI Act. It explores how the EU frames AI as both an innovative technology and a source of social, legal, and ethical risk requiring regulation.

Design/Methodology/Approach – A qualitative textual analysis approach is adopted. EU legal texts, policy summaries, implementation materials, and documents on general-purpose AI are reviewed. The analysis focuses on key terms such as risk, trustworthy AI, human-centric AI, transparency, fundamental rights, compliance, innovation, and harmonised rules.

Findings – The study finds that EU AI governance discourse is mainly built around risk-based regulation, human-centric legitimacy, transparency, accountability, market harmonisation, and global regulatory ambition. The AI Act presents AI as governable through classification, obligations, oversight, and enforcement. However, the discourse also contains tensions between innovation and control, legal certainty and technological uncertainty, and European digital sovereignty and global AI competition.

Research Implications – The study shows that the AI Act is not only a legal framework but also a strategic governance narrative. It demonstrates how the EU uses regulatory language to define AI risks, justify intervention, protect fundamental rights, and position itself as a global leader in responsible AI governance.

Keywords: EU AI Act; artificial intelligence governance; discourse analysis
JEL Classifications: K2, O33, L5

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I. Introduction

AI, as part of the digitization of today's world, is at the forefront of many debates surrounding an emerging global digital governance model. Modern digital technologies, including AI, are now integrated into the majority of the services that governments offer to their citizens, including employment, education, finance, healthcare, public services, and even communication and biometric security services. Attracting and adapting these technologies within the realm of governance and the provision of services to prevent possible negative consequences from their use within the social, political, and ethical dimensions of the state is a real challenge for governments today. The European Union (EU) attempts to address such challenges with the Artificial Intelligence Act, formally Regulation (EU) 2024/1689, which provides for the first legally binding framework for the regulation of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the European Union (European Parliament and Council, 2024). The AI Act entered into force on 1 August 2024 and will become fully applicable in stages, with most provisions applying from 2 August 2026. (European Commission, 2024).

The AI Act is the first of its kind, and as such is already an important legal instrument. The terminology the EU employs to describe AI is not exterior. Rather, it is a construction. The EU employs a multiplicity of terminology including phrases such as "AI regulation," [a term considered a construct, "risk based approach," "trustworthy AI," "Human Centered AI," "fundamental rights," "transparency," "safety," general-purpose AI," and "innovation," to name a few. The EU employs such terminology and constructs to demonstrate their position to the world in the AI governance realm. As such, the EU positions itself as a consensus-building regulatory actor that seeks to balance AI innovation with the protection of fundamental rights.

This paper presents a textual analysis of English-language resources pertaining to the AI Act, including the official EU descriptions of the AI Act, the regulation, and guidance on implementation as well as resources concerning general-purpose AI. The central question of this literary inquiry is: How do English resources pertaining to the AI Act shape the EU's articulation of artificial intelligence governance? This paper contends that the EU's AI governance articulation consists of four interconnected narratives, namely, risk management, human-centric legitimacy, market harmonisation, and global regulatory leadership.

II. Literature Review and Analytical Framework

AI governance has multiple layers including technical regulation, ethical considerations, politics, and the structuring of power and accountability in governance. Recent studies acknowledge these aspects of AI governance (Cath et al., 2018; Floridi and Cowls, 2019).. Jobin, Ienca, and Vayena (2019) explained that multiple global AI ethics frameworks are structured by the principles of transparency, justice, non-maleficence, responsibility and privacy. It is also noted that ethical principles can often be abstract and will remain so in the absence of a governance structure that allows for the enforcement of these principles.

AI governance in the EU is closely tied to the principle of "trustworthy AI". The High-Level Expert

Group on Artificial Intelligence describes trustworthy AI as lawful, ethical, and robust. In this discourse, AI is not presented merely as an economic development tool, but as a technology that should be aligned with fundamental rights, democratic oversight, and human dignity.

Another relevant concept is the 'Brussels Effect'. According to Bradford (2020), the European Union is capable of global regulatory standards as a result of the sheer size of its market and the seriousness of its legislation. In terms of AI, the AI Act is an attempt to set international standards. However, this ambition brings with it some problems. If the regulation is too strict, it may be said that innovation is stifled or that the regulation is unduly onerous on affected enterprises. Conversely, if the regulation is too lenient, the EU may be failing to safeguard its citizens from the pernicious effects of AI.

Discourse analysis is the main methodology of this study. As prescribed by Fairclough (1992) and Hajer (1995), discourse analysis has a focus on the way in which language is used to construct, or is reflective of, social relations, social problems, and the associated policy responses. In policy discourse, words do not merely reflect policy responses; they also construct policy problems, legitimate actors, and acceptable solutions. As a result, the words policy makers choose to use construct boundaries that define what is to be classified as a social problem, the social actors which are to be held accountable for the problem, and what is to be classified as legitimate. The AI Act, when viewed through this lens, reveals how the EU portrays AI as having the potential to be both beneficial and harmful, as well as something that is governable and of the utmost importance.

The focus of textual analysis is concerned with three aspects. The first is the choice of vocabulary when framing the problems posed by AI, the second is the justification for the solutions to be of a regulatory nature, and the third is the contradictions and tensions that exist in the EU's governance discourse.

III. Textual Materials and Method

The English-language sources and official explanatory documents related to the AI Act, which form the foundation of this research, include the final legal text of Regulation (EU) 2024/1689, policy pages of the European Commission, the AI Act implementation timeline, and official guidance documents concerning general-purpose AI. The European Union (EU) considers the AI Act a risk-based mechanism that categorizes AI systems as falling within the framework of unacceptable risk, high risk, limited risk, and minimal or no risk (European Commission, n.d.).

This research does not perform a quantitative corpus analysis. Rather, qualitative textual analysis is employed to discern repeated concepts, prevailing narratives and assumptions. Analysis focuses on the following terms: "risk," "trustworthy," "human-centric," "fundamental rights," "transparency," "safety," "innovation," "compliance," "general-purpose AI," and "harmonised rules." Such terms are useful to the extent that they lend insight into the European Union's perspective on the interfaces between artificial intelligence, society and their legal oversight.

As the chosen documents constitute both official and semi-official accounts of the AI Act, they are suitable

for this research. They are more than technical documents, as they convey the European Union's political and normative perceptions of AI governance to its citizens, businesses, regulators, and the world.

IV. Risk-Based Regulation as the Dominant Governance Logic

Central to the debate on the AI Act is its risk-based approach. The EU doesn't consider all AI systems to be equally dangerous or equally beneficial. Rather, the EU considers and categorizes AI with the potential for different levels of risk. The result is a differentiated governance system, where certain practices are banned, high-risk systems are controlled with specific provisions, systems of lower risk are subjected to requirements of transparency, and systems deemed minimal risk face few or no additional obligations under the AI Act. (European Commission, n.d.).

This risk-based discourse has a number of effects. To begin with, it describes a system of control that is proportional. This is because, in the view of the EU, the only way to avoid the accusation of anti-technology or 'over the top' control of the AI systems is to correlate the different levels of control to the levels of risk. Secondly, it makes AI systems manageable. This is achieved by breaking down an unmanageable and uncontrollable system into different categories that the law can regulate. Lastly, it places the EU in the position of a rational and reasonable regulator that seeks to make a distinction in AI between the harmful and the useful.

The risk-based approach has a number of shortcomings. The risks that are likely to be posed by AI systems are not static. A system that is considered low risk in one instance could easily be considered high risk in a different instance, especially when the system is deployed, combined with other systems, or is used by a powerful actor. A number of authors have issued a warning that the focus on risk-based regulation might lead to the (over)simplification of the system of controls when risks are prioritized over the control of the systems, other articulated forms of governance, and the (negative) structural consequences over an extended period of time (Veale and Borgesius, 2021; Ebers, 2025).

The analysis of risk creates a balance between legal certainty versus technological certainty. For the AI Act to provide sound legal measures, categories need to be established. The problem is, given the speed at which AI systems can develop, they will not always be confined to rigid categorizations. This especially applies to general-purpose AI models, which operate in a variety of contexts.

V. Transparency, Accountability and Compliance

Transparency is another key theme in the AI Act discourse. The EU repeatedly presents transparency as a mechanism through which AI systems can be made understandable, controllable and accountable. Transparency obligations are especially important for systems that interact with users, generate synthetic content or create risks of deception.

The discourse of transparency responds to a central problem in AI governance: many AI systems operate in ways that are difficult for ordinary users, regulators or affected individuals to understand. If AI decisions are opaque, it becomes difficult to challenge errors, identify discrimination or assign responsibility. Therefore, transparency is framed as a bridge between technical complexity and democratic accountability.

The General-Purpose AI Code of Practice reinforces this discourse. Published in July 2025, the Code is described by the European Commission as a voluntary tool to help providers comply with AI Act obligations on transparency, copyright, and safety and security for general-purpose AI models (European Commission, 2025). The Commission states that the Code includes chapters on transparency, copyright, and safety and security, with the safety and security chapter particularly relevant to providers of the most advanced models with systemic risk (European Commission, 2025).

The language of compliance is also important. The AI Act does not rely only on ethical persuasion. It translates ethical principles into obligations, documentation, conformity assessment and regulatory oversight. This marks a shift from voluntary AI ethics to binding AI governance. However, the use of codes of practice also shows that EU AI governance combines hard law with softer implementation tools. This hybrid model reflects the difficulty of regulating a fast-moving technology through legislation alone.

VI. General-Purpose AI and the Expansion of Governance Discourse

The EU's governance discourse has been expanded by the emergence of general-purpose AI. In the past, the AI policy discussions within the EU tended to focus on specific use cases, for example, biometric systems, automated decision-making, and high-risk use cases in employment and public services. Unlike these specific applications, general-purpose AI can be fine-tuned for many downstream applications, allowing for context-specific regulatory categorizations to be circumvented.

The EU process for the AI Act exemplifies this problem. According to the European Commission's AI Act service desk, given that general provisions, definitions, AI literacy and prohibitions will come into effect on 2nd February 2025, the rules and governance for general-purpose AI will come into effect on 2nd August 2025, with the full provisions to be implemented 2nd August 2027.

Shifting the focus from individual AI applications to general-purpose AI models also puts the focus on the large-scale AI model providers. The reason this shift is constructed in a positive light is because responsibility cannot sit with only the vendors of the applications. AI developers can influence the risks posed by the AI through the data they use for training, the design of the model, and the documentation of the model as well as the design and implementation of safety testing and the model's release. The concern for copyright, transparency, and systemic risk in the context of general-purpose AI shows that the EU views advanced AI as a problem of governance with multiple dimensions.

Simultaneously, the emergence of general-purpose AI has also shown the regulatory 'fit' that has been achieved using traditional terms. Terms such as 'provider', 'deployer', 'risk', 'systemic risk', and 'model

documentation' will need to be interpreted in the context of each specific technology. The EU's use of codes, guidance, and implementation tools show that the AI Act is not a governance settlement, but a morphology of a regulation.

VII. Table: Main Discursive Features of EU AI Governance

Discursive Feature	Key Terms	Governance Function	Main Tension
Risk-based regulation	risk, high-risk, unacceptable risk, safety	Classifies AI systems and justifies differentiated obligations	Fixed categories may not capture evolving AI harms
Human-centric legitimacy	trustworthy AI, fundamental rights, dignity, democracy	Presents regulation as morally and politically legitimate	Broad values may be difficult to operationalise
Transparency and accountability	disclosure, documentation, compliance, oversight	Makes AI systems more visible and contestable	Transparency may not always produce real accountability
Market harmonisation	harmonised rules, legal certainty, internal market	Prevents regulatory fragmentation and supports innovation	Compliance burdens may affect smaller firms
Global regulatory ambition	European values, digital sovereignty, responsible AI	Positions the EU as a global AI governance leader	Global influence may face resistance from industry and non-EU actors

Table 1 shows that the EU's AI governance discourse is not built around a single idea. It combines legal, ethical, economic and geopolitical vocabularies. The AI Act is therefore best understood as a multi-dimensional discourse that seeks to manage technological risk, protect rights, support markets and project European regulatory influence.Table 1 shows that the EU's AI governance discourse is not built around a single idea. It combines legal, ethical, economic and geopolitical vocabularies. The AI Act is therefore best understood as a multi-dimensional discourse that seeks to manage technological risk, protect rights, support markets and project European regulatory influence.

VIII. Conclusion

This paper has studied English-language resources pertaining to the EU AI Act from the perspective of governance discourse. According to this analysis, the EU approaches artificial intelligence as a useful but potentially harmful technology. The EU does not promote the rejection of AI. However, the EU does not promote the view of AI as a neutral technology, which should be subjected to uncontrolled market forces. Rather, the EU approaches AI as a technology that requires governance, which is proportional, structured and grounded in human rights.

Risk-based regulation is the primary logic of governance that the EU AI Act assumes. Through risk typologies, the EU makes AI governable and binds legal responsibilities to the potential of harm. In addition to this, the discourse of a human-centric AI legitimizes the moral basis of the governance framework by associating AI governance with Human rights and the values of democracy and trust. The EU AI Act primarily offers visibility and contestability of AI systems, as well as mechanisms of transparency and accountability. In addition to these provisions, the EU AI Act addresses market governance and the EU's digital sovereignty, indicating that the EU AI Act has a justification as both an economic policy and a geopolitical policy.

The EU will also have to resolve remaining tensions in the discourse. The EU will have to find a way to achieve a balance between promoting innovation and regulation, between legal certainties and technological uncertainties, and between ethical values and enforceability. General-purpose AI will exacerbate these tensions because it has the potential to be employed in many contexts and domains. The AI Act should be regarded in this context that the EU AI Act should not be viewed as the final act of AI governance. Rather it should be viewed as a regulation that is in a constant state of evolution and a discourse that the EU is implementing strategically to govern artificial intelligence.

The value of the AI Act is attributively dual. It is value added in its legal framework and in its content. The EU foreshadows the framework of ethical AI management by associating AI with trust, safety, rights, transparency, and responsibility. Actual governance will determine the viability of the proposed legislation and the essence of its content in the EU AI Act. The AI Act is already the most important document in the discussion of the governance of artificial intelligence.

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