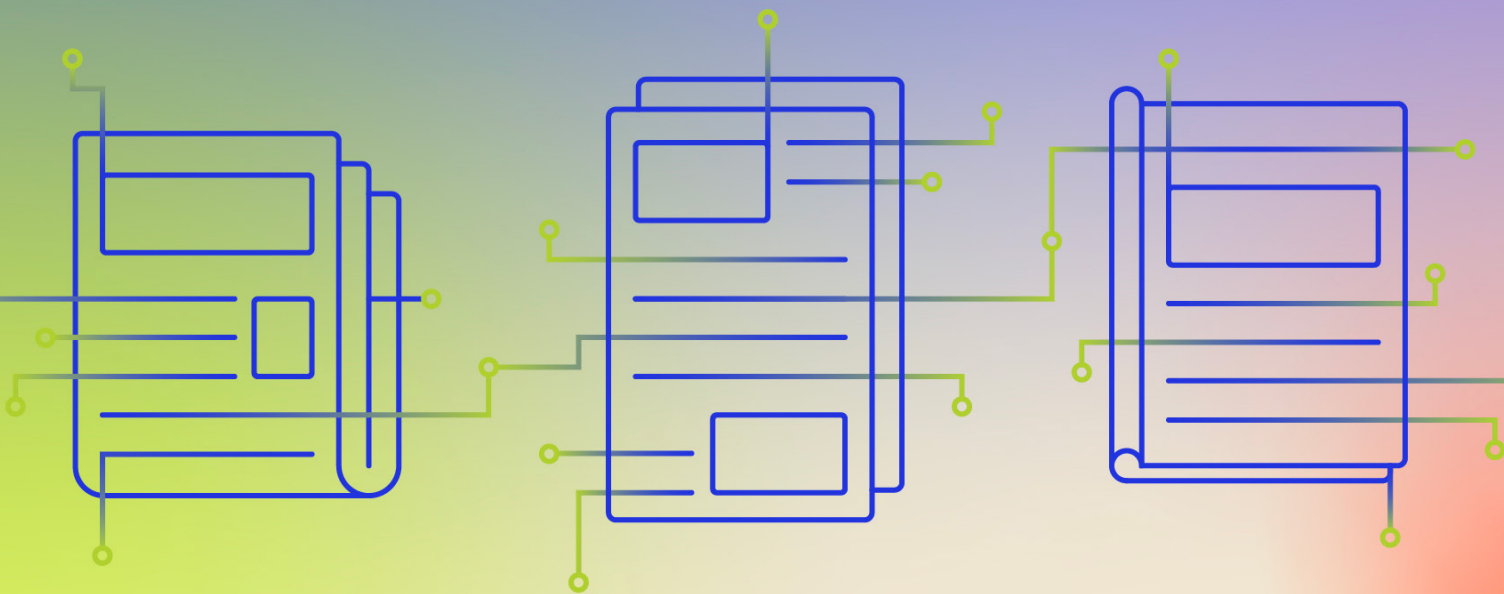


Media representation of AI in Italy

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF HOW MAJOR ITALIAN
NEWSPAPERS INTERPRET AUTOMATION

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Executive Summary

How do Italian media portray the many applications of artificial intelligence, and the consequences of integrating such technology into every aspect of our lives?

Hermes Center's comparative study seeks to provide some answers by examining journalistic coverage of AI in the print editions of four of Italy's leading newspapers: *Corriere della Sera*, *Il Sole 24 Ore*, *La Repubblica*, and *Il Giornale*.

Which voices are most prominently featured in Italian daily newspapers, and which are excluded? Which AI companies are mentioned most frequently? Which key words and concepts emerge from these stories? And what is the AI narrative actually lacking?

Our report focuses on how the media provide interpretive frameworks for understanding artificial intelligence. The analysis was carried out on a significant sample of 563 articles, all published between May 1, 2024, and August 15, 2024.

We chose this specific time window because it marks a pivotal moment in the public discussion of artificial intelligence, as on May 24, 2024 the European Union formally adopted the Artificial Intelligence Act (AI Act), the world's first comprehensive AI regulation. This allowed us to examine whether, and how, AI had become established within journalistic discourse – not only as a technological issue, but also

as an economic, political, cultural, and social one.

The analysis draws on the concept of *framing* to classify the main domains through which newspapers discuss artificial intelligence. Following the *framing theory* developed by sociologist Erving Goffman, a *frame* can be understood as an “interpretive framework”: it does not alter the facts themselves, but shapes how we recognise, organise, and assign meaning to them. Building on this approach, we developed a coding framework to analyse articles across three categories: (article) characteristics, editorial prominence, and interpretive content.

Finally, we placed our findings within a broader international context through interviews with experts from academia and civil society, who were invited to share their perspectives on the study's results. Their full comments are included in this report's appendix.

Although our analysis focuses exclusively on print editions, the results reveal some very interesting patterns. Here's what we were able to observe.

ABSENCE OF DEBATE ON THE AI ACT.

A first and crucial finding is the absence of any substantial debate on the AI Act. This controversial European regulation – the first of its kind globally – reached a critical stage of final approval during the selected time window; however, the newspapers we analysed neither described it in detail nor examined its technical or legislative content, nor did they meaningfully explore its implications for businesses and citizens. Instead, the AI Act largely remains in the background, often portrayed as an obstacle to European innovation or as a symbol of unnecessary bureaucracy in need of simplification. This is particularly striking given that newspapers – and the experts

they cite – frequently call for generic “rules” for artificial intelligence. Such calls often appear to overlook the fact that a comprehensive regulatory framework already exists, and that it is about to enter a crucial implementation phase across EU Member States.

TECHNO-OPTIMISM. Artificial intelligence is consistently portrayed as an economic, social, and anthropological revolution – one that is inevitable and unstoppable. The dominant message is that society, and especially the business community, must adapt to this transformation with little or no hesitation.

THE DOMINANCE OF THE ECONOMIC

FRAME. Unsurprisingly, one very dominant frame is the economic frame. This is true not only for *Il Sole 24 Ore*, where such an emphasis might be expected (*Il Sole 24 Ore's* focus is mainly on economics), but across all four newspapers analysed. Coverage of AI is often centered around its impact on businesses and startups, almost always from the perspective of those who manage them rather than those who work within them. The goal appears to be informing readers about how to maximise the benefits and minimise the risks associated with adopting AI systems in business and society.

From a financial perspective, this often takes the form of guidance on which stocks to invest in, to benefit from the disruptive yet fragile boom in AI-related assets, while also warning of a potential “AI bubble” and its possible collapse – a concern raised quite often, particularly by *Il Giornale*. From a managerial and operational perspective, AI is portrayed as a driver of productivity, efficiency and profitability, as well as a catalyst for developing the new skills considered “essential” to keep pace with rapid technological change.

STRONG ASYMMETRY BETWEEN RISKS AND BENEFITS.

Another recurring feature is the asymmetrical treatment of AI's risks and benefits. Risks are generally framed as potential future *threats* rather than as present-day harms. They are often discussed in existential, speculative, or philosophical terms, focusing on issues such as human autonomy, creativity in the age of intelligent automation, or the possibility of "machine domination" over humanity. These concerns are treated primarily as moral rather than legal or practical questions.

Benefits, by contrast, are usually presented as real and tangible. They are frequently illustrated through specific case studies and practical applications, often developed by startups – preferably, Italian ones. However, these benefits are rarely examined through rigorous empirical evidence and instead rely heavily on the claims of those developing the AI solutions themselves. The major exception concerns copyright issues related to AI-generated content – a topic that directly affects newspapers and the media industry.

LITTLE ANALYSIS OF THE REAL-WORLD IMPACTS OF AI ALREADY IN USE.

This does not mean that the portrayal of AI across the four newspapers is entirely uniform or one-dimensional. On the contrary, the analysis reveals editorial approaches that accommodate a range of positions, sometimes contradictory or competing with one another. In *Corriere della Sera* and *Il Giornale*, for example, AI may be described simultaneously as a "revolution" that assists humans without replacing them, and as a far more radical transformation in which human replacement and transcendence are plausible outcomes.

A more critical perspective can be found in *La Repubblica*, which advocates a form of critical anthropocentrism. Here, AI is viewed as a political choice rather than a

technological destiny, and as a source of power struggles and conflict rather than simply a driver of unprecedented efficiency and productivity. Yet even in this case, as with the more pragmatic approach of *Il Sole 24 Ore*, there is little fact-based analysis of the actual impacts produced by the many specific forms of AI already deployed throughout society and the economy.

REPRESENTATION FAVORS ELITES AND BIG TECH.

The representation of key actors strongly favors economic and technological elites, particularly major technology companies (the *big tech* sector), while overlooking critics and the perspectives of those harmed by AI.

The dominance of narratives originating in Silicon Valley becomes even more evident when considering the complete absence of voices from civil society that might offer more radical opinions. Also missing is the point of view of the victims of AI abuse – that is, individuals who have been unfairly affected or harmed by AI systems.

As a result, the public conversation reflected in the newspapers that we analysed is heavily shaped by the viewpoints of technology companies and "innovators" only, while the experiences, concerns, and interests of those most directly impacted by AI still receive little attention.

This is not the only gap identified in the study. Across all four newspapers, there is a complete absence of discussion of the excesses, abuses, and biases that can arise from the use of artificial intelligence in the name of "national security" – a term that is itself vague and elusive – as well as in the broader security context.



About Hermes Center

Hermes Center | Hacking for Human Rights is a non-profit organization based in Milan, Italy, and dedicated to protecting digital rights. At Hermes Center, we view technology as a tool to guarantee safety and security, while fully respecting privacy and freedom of expression.

Founded in 2012 by a group of developers, our initial focus was on building IT tools to support individuals affected by digital surveillance. This goal led to projects such as GlobaLeaks, which enabled anonymous whistleblowing, and OONI, which monitors Internet censorship worldwide.

Over time, Hermes Center has expanded its work through research, publications, international collaborations (including with the European Digital Rights network, of which we are members), and advocacy campaigns against invasive technologies like biometric (facial) recognition. Since 2024, we're also part of the very first Italian Network for Digital Human Rights (Rete per i Diritti Umani Digitali).

Our activities include: developing privacy-enhancing technologies, publishing reports and policy papers, planning events such as workshops/training sessions for fellow activists and journalists, and ultimately raising awareness – online and offline – on several digital rights issues, including the impact of AI on human rights.

Our team brings together developers, human rights and communications experts, investigative journalists and activists, and promotes values such as freedom of expression, and transparency and accountability in both public and private sectors.