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Digital Sovereignty and the EU's Identity Between Technological Innovation and European Values

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Abstract

The debate around 'digital sovereignty' identifies tensions rooted in the disparity between the EU's considerable economic and regulatory power in digital matters and its limited mandate and capabilities in foreign policy. Artificial intelligence (AI) is considered a strategic industry in Europe and abroad. Whilst most studies have focused on the 'tech war' between China and the United States, the role of the EU in this context is often underappreciated in affecting the outcome of this global competition. Nevertheless, contrary to conventional wisdom, so far, the EU has been a key policy entrepreneur with respect to the development and promotion of norms that regulate the use of AI, highlighting in particular a human-centric and trustworthy vision of AI. Focusing on the EU is important because of its relevance in setting norms in this area. In the context of the US–China 'tech war', the article thus looks into the EU's position in the global race to technology and, in particular, how it makes sense of the competition in the field of AI. The research aims to shed light on how the EU constructs its identity in this competitive context vis-à-vis the United States and China by investigating the narratives on AI at the EU level. The article carries out an *interpretivist narrative analysis* of the major policies, regulations and official discussions by the EU, including the AI Act, the European Commission's White Paper and other European Commission's official communications on AI. The article aims to raise awareness of the EU's role in shaping norms and practices on AI and opens up the debate on European identity.

Keywords: artificial intelligence; foreign policy; freedom, security and justice; international political economy/economics; international relations; security and defence

Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) is perceived as one of the most strategic industries as 'early adopters [of AI] are expected to become the next global leaders' (Csernatoni, 2019, p. 2). AI will 'trigger "revolutionary societal change on at least the scale of the Industrial Revolution"' (Baele et al., 2024, pp. 2–3). The general feeling amongst academia, practitioners and the general public is that of an 'AI Revolution' (Bremmer, 2023) and a 'race to AI' that could potentially have repercussions on national state security and leadership in global politics (Smuha, 2021; Valeriani and Polito, 2025), as AI is being used across different sectors, from manufacturing, healthcare and agriculture to defence and cybersecurity, as a critical strategic enabler for national and European security (Csernatoni, 2024). Several European Union (EU) member states pointed out that applying AI enhances military capabilities on both physical and virtual battlegrounds, serving as a threat or opportunity (NATO Strategic Concept, 2022, in Lingevicius, 2023).

The race to AI feeds into the concept of 'technopolitics', according to which the development of new technologies can be used as a strategic advantage to other states (Csernatoni, 2024). Technological advances are often seen as strictly related to power

and competition in global politics, influencing international relations on the world stage (Ayoub and Payne, 2016; Baele et al., 2024). This is also linked to the concept of digital sovereignty, which refers to independence in the digital space (Mueller, 2020; Sahin and Barker, 2021; Timmers, 2019). In this context of a global race to AI and technological advancements, most studies (Bode et al., 2025a, 2025b; Chang, 2021; Miller, 2022; Retzmann, 2025; Sun, 2019; Wong, 2021) focus on the competition between the United States and China, to the point of referring to a 'tech war' between the two states. Such studies overlook the EU's role and ambitions for strategic autonomy (Broeders et al., 2023). The article aims at understanding the EU's approach to digital sovereignty, its international influence and its effects on member states and the values it protects.

Whilst making progress in striving for more investment (EP, 2024, p. 1), one of the main concerns in the EU is that it lags behind both China and the United States in the global competition towards developing new technologies (Monsees and Lambach, 2022) and, specifically, AI (Ghiretti, 2021; Manyika et al., 2017; Ulnicane, 2022). This perception has pushed the EU not only to boost innovation in the field but, most importantly, to attempt to find a common position on AI: since 2016, it has been pushing towards the development of norms that regulate the use of AI, recognising the need to regulate the field (Smuha, 2021, pp. 59–60) and to be more public-interventionist (Heidebrecht, 2024). Despite the growing gap between the rapid development of AI technologies and existing normative and regulatory frameworks (Feldstein, 2023), the European Commission (EC) has been actively influencing member states' policies on AI to promote a unified stance known as 'AI Made in Europe' (Af Malmborg and Trondal, 2023; EC, 2018b, p. 18; Krarup and Horst, 2023; Mügge, 2024; Ulnicane, 2022; Ulnicane et al., 2021). EU policies on AI are driven by a 'balanced approach' (EC, 2021c, p. 3), which considers not only research, development and investments in this emerging technology but also its regulation following the EU's fundamental values. Compared with the United States and China, the EU has been promoting a 'human-centric' approach to the development and use of AI (HLG-AI, 2019a) to boost innovation whilst respecting the fundamental values mentioned in Article 2 of the Treaty of the EU (Ulnicane, 2022). Hence, as Roberts et al. (2023) argue, the EU aims to compete globally in AI whilst seeking to mitigate ethical risks and protect fundamental rights, setting boundaries that enable the ethical development of AI technologies (Csernatoni, 2019).

This article shows how the EU is at the forefront of asserting itself as a *normative power* (Manners, 2002; Whitman, 2011), espousing a prescriptive approach in finalising norms based on a human-centric vision of AI, enabling the EU to position itself as a significant actor on the world stage, but also the promotion and dissemination of norms in this area. According to Csernatoni (2019, p. 3), the EU's development of guidelines to foster *Trustworthy AI* 'could indeed become the so-called silver bullet in the EU's strategy to "catch up" with the USA or China'. The EU has indeed been a pioneer in regulating AI, as demonstrated by the AI Act and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).[1] This is also clear from the rhetoric of the EC: 'There is strong global competition on AI among the USA, China and Europe. Nowadays, the USA leads but China is catching up fast and aims to lead by 2030. For the EU, it is not so much a question of winning or losing a race

[1]The GDPR is an EU regulation on data protection, first released on 25 May 2018 and set to harmonise data privacy laws across EU member states.

but of finding the way of embracing the opportunities offered by AI in a way that is human-centred, ethical, secure, and true to our core values' (EC, 2018a, pp. 12–13). In contrast to what Barbé et al. (2009) argue, the EU does not merely promote policy convergence based on international rules other than the EU's but actively shapes norms on AI.

Thus, the article investigates the extent to which the EU has established itself as a norm entrepreneur in AI. To this end, the article relies on *an interpretivist narrative analysis* to look at the different narratives on the use and development of AI, considering twofold levels of analysis: on one side, the strategic autonomy leading the EU as a frontrunner in AI regulation; on the other side, the EU as a defender of EU values and norms, focusing on master narratives centred on the EU's identity and lower level narratives related to the EU's conceptualisation of AI. In so doing, the article argues that these narratives inform and shape the EU's identity.[2] Whilst filling the scholarly gap on the EU's role in AI, the article relies on the literature on digital sovereignty to contribute to debates on 'Normative Power Europe' (NPE) (Manners, 2002).

The article proceeds as follows. First, it outlines the theoretical underpinnings of this research and the debates on NPE. Second, it delves into the methodology guiding the article, focusing particularly on the different levels of narratives in the EU on AI. The third section discusses the empirical findings of this research, highlighting how the different narratives on AI and on the EU's identity interact with one another, mutually reinforcing each other. Finally, the article concludes this study and points out future avenues for research.

I. The EU and Digital Sovereignty

Since the launch of the AI strategy in 2018, the EU has aimed to promote a unified approach to AI, as the 'Digital Decade' initiative sets EU standards for data, technology and infrastructure (EC, 2018a, 2021a) and reduces foreign dependency (Christakis, 2020; Wenzelburger and König, 2025). Digital sovereignty encompasses state, corporate and individual control over infrastructure, industries and rights (Celeste, 2021; Glasze et al., 2023; Pohle and Thiel, 2020; Roberts et al., 2021). According to Monsees and Lambach (2022), the EU's striving for digital sovereignty vis-à-vis China and the United States indeed allows the EU to construct its identity by juxtaposing itself against these two major powers. Literature identifies three components of digital sovereignty: (a) state control over infrastructure, (b) the development of competitive domestic digital industries and (c) the protection of citizens and their rights (Broeders et al., 2023; Couture and Toupin, 2019; Pohle and Thiel, 2020; Roberts et al., 2021). The article will focus on the latter issue, as the EU narrative appears more oriented in this direction.

The definition of AI shapes how people view its impact. Some critics see AI as overly disruptive (Armstrong et al., 2016; Babcock et al., 2019; Müller and Bostrom, 2014) or a threat to principles like transparency and accountability (Bryson and Theodorou, 2019;

[2]The timeframe (2018–today) was chosen on the basis of discussions in the EU on AI and, in particular, on the launch of the EU strategy on AI in 2016 on the part of the EC (2018a). The documents collected (20 in total) include EC official documents and communications, European Parliament's resolutions and the official reports by the Independent High-Level Expert Group on Artificial Intelligence set up by the EC. The analysis carries out an interpretivist qualitative narrative analysis of the key documents that are representative of the official EU narrative on AI from 2018 to today.

Floridi and Cowls, 2022), whilst others praise its potential to drive innovation (e.g., Shadbolt et al., 2016). Another perspective frames AI adoption as inevitable, like past technological shifts that benefited early adopters (Milner and Solstad, 2021). Ultimately, the definition of AI deeply affects its normative evaluation (Büthe et al., 2022; Mügge, 2024).

The EU is a global actor whose evolving identity depends on areas like competition, data governance and digital innovation (Monsees and Lambach, 2022). In the context of AI, the EU's identity is performative, reflecting both its technological sovereignty ambitions and external normative power projections (Diez, 2014; Diez et al., 2022). This article views identity as relational, shaped by global technological competition and regulatory opportunity structure, adopting the perspective of the EU as 'Normative Power Europe', a concept coined by Manners to stress the EU's 'ability to shape conceptions of "normal"', establishing itself as a normative power (Manners, 2002, p. 240), acting as a transnational promoter of its norms abroad (Lingevicius, 2023, p. 18) and within member states and pursuing normative goals grounded in shared values, rather than relying on military or economic power (Diez et al., 2022; Larsen, 2014; Manners, 2006; Veebel, 2019). We focus on the various narratives that have emerged from EU official discussions to understand how the EU constructs its identity vis-à-vis China and the United States, as well as its influence on its member states. According to Manners (2013), the concept of 'pouvoir normative de l'UE', defined by Saurugger (2010) as the capacity to rely on normative justification instead of material incentives or physical force (Manners, 2009, 2010, 2011), encompasses various norms (utilitarian, social, maxim and narrative). *Utilitarian norms* regulate behaviour to reduce uncertainty by institutionalising conventions and co-ordinating to maximise utility (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998; Spruyt, 2000). It aligns with *social norms*, which shape the interests of constitutive actors and embed values in EU society by defining a matrix of principles within a social group. *Maxim norms* are referred to as rules that distinguish moral/immoral behaviours and are reflected in the EU's adherence to universal principles like democracy. *Narrative norms* serve to legitimise the narrative, recognising that 'the capacity to define normality influences nearly every aspect of international relations' (Bleiker, 1998, p. 474). Diez and Pace (2011) highlighted the significance of narrative norms, and the effect EU normative power discourse has in conflict situations. Moreover, scholars argue the EU influences global politics and member states by promoting norms such as democracy, human rights and sustainability, rather than through coercion or economic incentives (Manners, 2013). In particular, the nine core norms that the EU promotes are *peace*, *liberty*, *democracy*, *equality and human rights, rule of law*, *social solidarity*, *sustainable development*, *anti-discrimination* and *good governance* (Manners, 2002, 2008).

The six mechanisms of normative power are the following: *Contagion* (unintentional diffusion between EU and other global actors); *Informational* (persuasion through a range of strategic communications); *Procedural* (institutionalisation of relationships between the EU and other partners); *Transference* (transferring material or immaterial incentives); *Overt diffusion* (physical presence of the EU in third states and international organisations); *Cultural filter* (interplaying between the construction of knowledge and the creation of social and political identity by the contents of norm diffusion).

The article, therefore, draws on the *Digital Sovereignty* debate and feeds into the broader debate on NPE. It aims not only to investigate the extent to which it promotes international norms on the use and development of AI but also to trace how this shapes its identity as a normative power on the international stage.

Since 2018, the EU has taken several policy initiatives to influence its member states to adopt a common policy stance on AI and boost its position in the global race to AI vis-à-vis China and the United States (Mügge, 2024). Whilst the latter two have focused their policies on a mostly unregulated development of AI, the EU has been advocating for a European approach to AI that respects the EU's fundamental values, whilst this approach has drawn criticism (Wörsdörfer, 2023). As Johansson-Nogués et al. (2020, p. 2) argue, in the context of a general crisis of the liberal international order (LIO), as well as internal struggles and criticisms directed at the EU, 'the EU finds itself ever more alone […] as the contested defender of cosmopolitan ideals'. In particular, the EU may be capitalising on the 'window of opportunity' (Schön-Quinlivan and Scipioni, 2017), given that AI is an emerging technology, to adopt a balanced approach to AI. In line with the literature on problem framing (Mintrom, 2019), the EU has been leveraging the perception of AI as a disruptive technology and a potential threat to foster AI policies that respect the EU's fundamental values (Bareis, 2024; Laux et al., 2024; Stamboliev and Christiaens, 2024).

II. Research Methodology

The single case study on EU digital sovereignty stems from the need to examine the EU narrative following two perspectives: internal (influence on member states) and external (relations with other superpowers).

The article relies on an *interpretivist narrative analysis* of EU official documents on AI. Thus, interpretivism allows us to understand actors' meaning-making processes, rather than focusing on objective truths, with a focus on how narratives construct reality and inform action (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012; Soss, 2015; Yanow, 2006). Narratives are a type of discourse that revolves around a plot, a set of characters and a lesson (Hagström and Gustafsson, 2019), which allows political actors to frame issues in ways that reflect identities, values and strategic positions. Thus, it is a discourse that presents events in sequence to provide insights into the world or people's experiences (Hinchman and Hinchman, 2001, as cited in Hagström and Gustafsson, 2019, p. 390). Coticchia and Catanzaro (2022) address narrative hierarchies by distinguishing between frames, strategic narratives, master narratives and ideology to improve analytical precision, in context where narratives are used instrumentally, such as in military interventions. Hagström and Gustafsson's framework is well suited to analyse how the EU uses narratives to justify its AI regulations and connect them with wider European values.

Following an initial narrative screening, which categorised the EU institutional narratives, we refined our analysis with additional documentary evidence, whilst refraining from examining how these narratives were practically implemented by EU institutional entities.

Master narratives reach broader audiences as they hold far-reaching beliefs, widely accepted by the public. On the other hand, lower level narratives are more specific but embedded in the broader master narratives. The two levels of the narrative are deeply interconnected.

For the analysis, the master narratives related to the EU's identity define a twofold level of analysis:

- the EU as a democratic leader and as a defender of liberal values (where AI can be perceived as a threat to European values) and
- the EU as a frontrunner in AI regulation (where the EU considers AI as an opportunity for EU member states).

Lower level narratives revolve around the EU's conceptualisation of AI, its 'appropriate' use and development. Building on Manners' core norms, our theoretical expectations can be proposed in Table 1 where lower level narratives on the AI reinforce the EU's identity as a normative power in developing AI's ethical guidelines. At the same time, the EU's identity as a defender of liberal norms such as the respect for human rights and the protection of democracy informs the lower level narratives on AI, as emerged from NPE core norms.

The article argues that the two levels of narratives should be studied to fully understand both the EU's stance on AI and its identity in the global scenario: the EU's high-level narrative about AI as an instrument of 'human-centric technological sovereignty' and more specific narratives relating to risk, competitiveness, ethics or global leadership. This distinction enables us to map narrative consistency across policy documents and examine how lower level narratives derive meaning and legitimacy from the master narrative. This analysis clarifies narrative hierarchy and demonstrates how coherence across narrative levels affects the EU's influence in global AI discussions.

The documents under study span from 2018 – when EC launched the EU Strategy on AI – to today; they include a variety of official EU documents broadly relating to AI. Actors within the EU framework that are particularly relevant for shaping norms on AI and whose narratives are therefore taken into account are the Directorate-General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology and, particularly, the Robotics and AI Innovation and Excellence Unit, the European Group on Ethics and Science in New

Table 1: Master Narrative and Lower Level Narrative and NPE Principles.

Master narrative level	*Lower level narrative*	*NPE core norms (Manners, 2008)*
EU as defender of liberal value – AI as a potential threat	1 Ethical AI (especially linked to privacy, GDPR) 2 Protection of human rights 3 Democracy 4 Freedom	1 Social solidarity 2 Equality and human rights 3 Democracy 4 Liberty
EU as frontrunner – AI as an opportunity	5. Trustworthy AI 6. Human-centred AI 7. Benefits of AI 8. Balanced approach (between development and regulation) 9. AI as a strategic industry for sustainability	5. Rule of law 6. Antidiscrimination 7. Peace 8. Good governance 9. Sustainable development

Source: Authors' elaboration.

Technologies and the Council of Europe Ad Hoc Committee on AI.[3] The coding method that we adopted followed an iterative abductive approach combining inductive and deductive coding. Hence, we identified core codes from reading the literature on the topics and then combined these with additional codes that we deducted from the texts under study. Rather than emphasising generalisability, this approach to coding focuses on intersubjectivity and the interpretative role of the scholar conducting the analysis (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012). Codes relating to the master narrative on the EU's identity include 'the EU as a norm entrepreneur', 'the EU as a competitor', 'the EU as a leader' and 'the EU as lagging behind'. These codes reflect the role of the EU, especially concerning China and the United States, and signal the EU as a leader in AI regulation and norm-setting, showing it as a valid competitor in AI development. However, they also reflect the widespread belief that the EU is lagging behind China and the United States in the investment field. Additional codes are the following: 'China as a competitor', 'US unrestricted development of AI', 'cooperation with the US', 'cooperation with like-minded states' and 'single market for AI'. These narratives portray China as a potentially threatening competitor and the United States as an actor developing AI without regulatory concerns. They also point to specific lessons: co-operating with the United States and with like-minded states that share the same fundamental values as the EU, as well as fostering an EU single market for AI. Lower level codes include 'benefits of AI', 'AI as a strategic industry', 'AI as a threat', 'trustworthy AI', 'ethical AI', 'human-centric AI', 'protection of fundamental rights' and 'supply-chain vulnerability'. These narratives depict AI in the EU as both transformative and disruptive, highlighting the need for regulation that safeguards privacy, rights and human oversight. We use direct quotations for transparency in our findings. Whilst recognising multiple interpretations per interpretivism, we highlight the intersubjective and 'reflexive' nature of this research (Bode, 2020, p. 354).

III. Diffusing Norms Whilst Constructing Its Identity

Since 2018, narratives on AI development in the EU have evolved alongside discussions about its identity, particularly regarding China and the United States. This contributes to narrative norms, which are essential for legitimising the EU's identity through discourse and symbolic actions (Manners, 2013). AI narratives highlight the need to regulate AI for trustworthiness and a human-centric approach, supporting the EU's role as an international leader in AI norm-setting, advocating for liberal values such as democracy, human dignity, freedom of expression, non-discrimination and data respect, shaping an EU vision of AI aligned with these fundamental values, as expected by NPE values. These values serve as social norms that influence both EU institutions and actors' identities and expectations within a shared normative environment (Manners, 2013).

The AI regulation has become a cornerstone of the EU's strategic approach to AI, gaining significance in response to rapid digital transformations that have redefined security paradigms and governance priorities (Mügge, 2024). AI governance reflects how the EU strives to balance security-focused imperatives with broader regulatory goals, as also NPE core norms stated with the *rule of law*. EU actors increasingly shape security policy,

[3]All documents are publicly available in English, especially through the Eur-Lex platform (https://eur-lex.europa.eu/homepage.html) and the official website of the EU containing EU publications on Artificial Intelligence (https://op.europa.eu/en/web/general-publications/ai).

particularly cybersecurity, through regulatory tools, mirroring a trend of institutionalised regulation in Europe's governance system (Kruck and Weiss, 2023). This regulatory approach prioritises the balance between security and rights-based governance, showcasing the EU's commitment to ethical limits on technological development, also in light of *sustainable development* goals.

At the master narrative level, the EU positions itself as a guardian of liberal democratic values. At the lower level, policy-specific narratives emphasise trustworthy and human-centric AI. These levels of discourse are mutually reinforcing: the normative framing of AI as ethical and rights-based supports the EU's broader identity linked to the NPE norms of *antidiscrimination* and *rule of law*, whilst the EU's identity narratives shape and legitimise its specific vision of AI regulation. This section examines how these narrative levels interact to support both norm diffusion and identity construction in EU policy.

Lower Level Narratives and NPE Core Values

As stressed by our conceptualisation of master level narrative on AI as an opportunity or potential threat (Table 1), EU narratives on AI are based on a double perception of this new technology as both transformative and disruptive (Csernatoni, 2024). The EU acknowledges 'a wide array of economic and societal benefits [of AI] across the entire spectrum of industries and social activities' (EC, 2021c, p. 1). Amongst the industries recurrently mentioned in EU documents are 'transport, medical care, rescue, education and farming', where AI, and in particular machine learning (ML), 'offers enormous economic and innovative benefits' (EP, 2017, para. E, H). In addition to increasing efficiency in all economic sectors (EC, 2018b, p. 1):

> AI is helping us to solve some of the world's biggest challenges: from treating chronic diseases or reducing fatality rates in traffic accidents to fighting climate change or anticipating cybersecurity threats. (EC, 2018a, p. 1)

AI has also a 'profound impact […] on the ability of law enforcement authorities to respond to terrorist threats in line with fundamental rights and freedoms' (EC, 2021a, p. 50). Indeed, AI can be a strategic tool by 'enable[ing] law enforcement to keep pace with the fast-developing technologies used by criminals and their cross-border activities' (EC, 2021b, p. 3). Thus, further developing this technology is perceived strategically important to 'provide key competitive advantages to companies and the European economy' (EC, 2021c, p. 1).

However, AI is also portrayed as a potential threat to individuals and society. ML risks transparency and responsibility in decision-making (EP, 2017, para. H), robotics contributes to 'proliferation of weapons of mass destruction' (EP, 2017, para. 64) and remote biometric identification impinges on individual freedom (EC, 2021c, p. 3), whilst coping with both the benefits of AI and a balanced approach between *sustainable development* and *rule of law*. In addition,

> workers fear they will lose their job because of automation, consumers wonder who is responsible in case a wrong decision is taken by an AI-based system, small companies do not know how to apply AI to their business, AI start-ups do not find the resources and talent they need in Europe […]. (EC, 2018b, para. 1)

AI may also impact the labour market by exacerbating inequalities between high- and low-skilled workers (EC, 2018a, p. 12), addressing the narrative of human-centred AI, reflected in the *antidiscrimination* NPE's core value. Overall, the harm that may result from AI 'might be both material (safety and health of individuals, including loss of life, damage to property) and immaterial (loss of privacy, limitations to the right of freedom of expression, human dignity, discrimination for instance in access to employment)' (EC, 2020, p. 10). The EU has responded to concerns about AI risks by introducing a risk-based framework that categorises technologies from low to high risk (EC, 2018b) to balance innovation with the reduction of societal harm. This process also contributes to the definition of *utilitarian norms* – shared rules that facilitate the practical governance of AI systems, such as ensuring market interoperability, product safety or technological reliability. A key lesson drawn from the narrative of disruptive AI is therefore to determine a shared definition of AI (EP, 2017) and to adopt a 'balanced approach', consisting of fostering investments and development of this technology whilst taking into account its potential risks (EC, 2021c, p. 3), also in the rhetoric of *good governance*.

The narrative of AI as a threat has shaped the EU's vision of AI, focusing on interconnected concepts: AI as trustworthy and human-centric. According to the EU (EC, 2019) and re-echoed by the Independent High-Level Expert Group (HLEG) on AI set up by the EC, AI 'should be lawful, complying with all applicable laws and regulations; 2. it should be ethical, ensuring adherence to ethical principles and values; and 3. it should be robust, both from a technical and social perspective, since, even with good intentions, AI systems can cause unintentional harm' (HLEG-AI, 2019a, p. 5), by enacting *utilitarian norms*. This means that it must fulfil seven requirements, namely, 'human agency and oversight', 'technical robustness and safety', 'privacy and data governance', 'transparency', 'diversity, non-discrimination and fairness', 'societal and environmental well-being' and 'accountability' (EC, 2019, p. 3). In other words, AI must be transparent and safe; it must be controlled by human beings, be accountable and ensure that it respects the fundamental rights that are at the heart of the EU, including the 'respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities' (EC, 2019, p. 2) as *social norms*. In addition to respecting the fundamental values enshrined in the *EU Charter of Fundamental Rights*, AI should work to

> positively affect the rights of a number of special groups, such as the workers' rights to fair and just working conditions (Article 31), a high level of consumer protection (Article 28), the rights of the child (Article 24) and the integration of persons with disabilities (Article 26). The right to a high level of environmental protection and the improvement of the quality of the environment (Article 37) is also relevant, including in relation to the health and safety of people. (EC, 2021c, p. 11)

Whilst there are 'tensions between protecting rights of individuals and firms and encouraging innovation with trying to maximise openness and transparency', the EU has been working to 'establish a *distinctive form of AI* that is ethically robust and protects the rights of individuals, firms, and society at large' (EC, 2018a, p. 10, emphasis added), aligning with *maxim norms* that guide moral action and legitimate authority in global governance (Manners, 2013).

In addition to respect for the fundamental rights of the EU Charter, the EU has heavily emphasised the need for ethical AI that complies with the GDPR of the EU. Privacy is defined as 'fundamental right particularly affected by AI systems' and therefore closely linked to 'the principle of prevention of harm' (HLEG-AI, 2019a, p. 12). As the EC's *Coordinated Plan on Artificial Intelligence* reports:

> For *AI made in Europe* one key principle will be 'ethics by design' whereby ethical and legal principles, on the basis of the GDPR, competition law compliance, absence of data bias are implemented since the beginning of the design process. (EC, 2018b, p. 18, emphasis added)

This highlights that ethical principles and privacy protection are core aspects of 'AI made in Europe', distinguishing it from other AI forms and reinforcing the EU's social norms by embedding rights, fairness and equality into digital policy (Manners, 2008). A complementary narrative to that of trustworthy AI is 'human-centric AI'. This signals that AI should revolve around humans, work for people, serve their interests and needs and be controlled by human beings respecting *equality* and *human rights* as NPE suggests. In the words of the EC:

> AI systems should support individuals in making better, more informed choices in accordance with their goals. They should act as enablers to a flourishing and equitable society by supporting human agency and fundamental rights, and not decrease, limit or misguide human autonomy. The overall wellbeing of the user should be central to the system's functionality. (EC, 2019, p. 4)

Accordingly, 'AI is not an end in itself, but a tool that has to serve people with the ultimate aim of increasing human well-being' (EC, 2019, p. 1) as *narrative norms*, namely, constructs that provide legitimacy by framing EU identity through a coherent moral storyline (Bleiker, 1998; Manners, 2013). This is highlighted in the discussions and amendments by the EP, which proposed a 'human-centric' regulation (EP, 2023). As discussed in the Policy and Investment Recommendations for Trustworthy AI by the HLEG on Artificial Intelligence (2019b), human-centric AI and trustworthy AI are the foundation of 'AI Made in Europe'. Thus, the EU encourages innovation, research and development of AI technologies whilst fostering a consensus on the centrality of human beings. The mechanism of *normative-pouvoir* in action towards member states includes the cultural filter – which promotes socialisation and internalisation of values – and the informational mechanism, exercised through strategic communications by entities such as the HLEG on AI. Of these, the mechanisms related to unintentional diffusion (contagion) and transfer through material/immaterial incentives (transference) or overt diffusion are not activated in this process. These lower level narratives are particularly evident in the AI Act, which clearly stresses a 'human-centric and trustworthy artificial intelligence (AI)' (EP, 2024, para. 1): the lower level narratives of the EU's AI discourse are most pronounced in the AI Act, which consistently champions a 'human-centric and trustworthy' approach. This framing is the most recurring theme.

The EC's 2024 strategy for boosting generative AI under the GenAI4EU initiative also explicitly links technological innovation to the diffusion of European values, reinforcing the EU's vision of 'trustworthy AI' as a global benchmark for responsible innovation

(EC, 2024). These lower level narratives on the EU's vision of AI are informed by the master narrative of the EU's identity as a defender of liberal norms.

Master Narratives: The EU's Identity as a Norm Entrepreneur

Through the lower level narratives, the EU has clearly positioned itself in opposition to other major powers such as China and the United States as it speaks of a 'European AI' that is intrinsically different from the rest of the world (EC, 2020, p. 2). The EU promotes careful AI regulation centred on individual rights, reinforcing its position as a global competitor and standard-setter. Its commitment to liberal norms drives its focus on trustworthy, human-centric AI.

This narrative architecture underpins the EU's strategy of norm diffusion. Internally, the EU deploys a full spectrum of normative mechanisms (including the cultural filter, informational diffusion and procedural standardisation) to shape member state behaviours.

These efforts position the EU as a regulatory power in a geopolitical context marked by perceived technological lag and strategic vulnerability. Narratives on AI and the EU's identity are shaped by perceived supply-chain vulnerability and urgency to boost AI innovation and investments at the EU level (EC, 2021a, p. 44). For example, dependency on non-European providers is said to pose risks to security because of the different safety standards outside of the EU context (HLEG-AI, 2019b, para. 19). The perceived supply-chain vulnerability is further exacerbated by the widespread perception that the EU is lagging behind both China and the United States in the race to AI (EC, 2018a, p. 4). The EC Joint Research Centre report (EC, 2018a, pp. 8–9) states that in AI competition between China and the United States, Europe lags as few businesses use AI compared to these countries, with the 'market currently dominated by non-EU players' (EC, 2020, p. 4; HLEG-AI, 2019b, p. 15). China is perceived as a major threatening competitor in the global race to AI with a state-led model strategy integrating AI development into its economic and national priorities. It is set to become the world leader in AI by 2030 and has also been undertaking other initiatives, such as the Belt and Road Initiative and the Asian Infrastructures Investment Bank, 'to shape a geopolitical environment more favourable to its interests' (EC, 2018a, p. 46). Its approach is, however, in stark contrast to the West as it uses AI to control the population (EC, 2018a, p. 46). On the other hand, the United States is also depicted as different from the EU context because of its 'unrestricted development of AI', which contrasts with the EU's balanced approach (EC, 2018a, p. 25).

Thus, China neglects rights, and the United States takes a market-driven model with a light-touch regulatory framework (Chun et al., 2024; Pernot-Leplay, 2025; Prenga, 2024), whereas the EU not only defends liberal norms but also plays a key role in shaping and promoting AI norms internationally abroad with 'the ambition then to bring Europe's ethical approach to the global stage' (EC, 2018b, para. 2.6). The EU has been promoting a 'European approach to AI' (EC, 2018a, p. 12), different from China and the United States and based on its focus on placing the citizen at the centre of the stage as 'part of a vision that promotes Trustworthy AI which we believe should be the foundation upon which Europe can build leadership in innovative, cutting-edge AI systems. This ambitious vision will help securing human flourishing of European citizens, both individually and collectively' (HLEG-AI, 2019a, p. 35).

Hence, the EU positions itself as a norm entrepreneur that can diffuse its European norms on AI to other member states and 'shape global norms and standards and promote trustworthy AI' (EC, 2021c, p. 5). The EU is shaping its identity as a norm entrepreneur amongst member states through its AI norms; whilst the United States and China lead in AI advancement, the EU is emerging as a leader in 'race to AI regulation' (Smuha, 2021, p. 59). The EU promotes this model not only in internal policy-making but also in external norm diffusion strategies. For instance, by signing the Council of Europe Framework Convention on AI and Human Rights, the EU consolidates its identity as a norm entrepreneur, broadening its values-based regulatory approach to a multilateral legal framework aligned with the AI Act (Council of the European Union, 2024). The Convention reaffirms commitments to human dignity, democracy and rule of law – core to the EU's narrative of AI governance – and closely mirrors the architecture of the EU's AI Act. By aligning multilateral legal frameworks with internal standards, the EU enhances its role as a normative actor and a global standard-setter in emerging technologies. The EU's claim to regulatory leadership faces both internal challenges and external pressures. The recent withdrawal of the AI Liability Directive, influenced by US interests, shows that the EU's normative approach can be contested or reactive. These developments highlight the evolving nature of the EU's identity amid geopolitical realities.

Therefore, the EU has drawn two main 'lessons'. The EU must promote a unified regulatory framework and a single market to enhance competitiveness and leadership (EC, 2021c; HLEG-AI, 2019b). Thus, 'the EU must act as one and define its own way, based on European values, to promote the development and deployment of AI' (EC, 2020, p. 1). Second, it should co-operate with like-minded states that share the same fundamental values (EC, 2018b, 2019, 2020, 2021c). To globally lead in the diffusion of norms on AI, 'the EU intends to deepen partnerships, coalitions and alliances with third countries – notably likeminded partners […]', such as the United States (EC, 2018b, 2021b, p. 4).

Conclusions

In the global AI race and tech war between China and the United States, the EU is positioning itself as a norm entrepreneur in AI regulation. Unlike the rest of the world, which focuses on unrestricted innovation, the EU balances innovation with investments whilst regulating AI in line with its fundamental values. We analysed how the EU constructs its identity as a normative power through norm diffusion in AI, stressing the importance of norm-setting in AI regulation, as promoting norms enables the EU to assert itself as a relevant actor internationally.

The article has identified lower level narratives concerning the EU's conceptualisation of AI. Whilst acknowledging the benefits of this new technology, the EU recurrently emphasises the potential threats and risks that AI may pose to individuals and society. Following this narrative on 'disruptive AI', we have detected the lower level narratives that emphasise a vision of AI that is lawful, ethical and robust and which abides by the fundamental values at the heart of the EU, including democracy, equality, freedom of expression and the protection of personal data. In addition, they conceptualise AI to serve people's needs and be controlled by human beings.

This article adopts an analytical framework to examine the EU narratives surrounding AI. Specifically, it identifies a *master narrative* that operates on two intertwined levels: the EU as a democratic leader and a defender of liberal values, framing AI competition as a potential threat to European ideals and, the EU as a frontrunner in AI regulation, leveraging its role as a norm entrepreneur to highlight AI's potential as an opportunity for member states. Then, the analysis explores *lower level narratives* on the EU's conceptualisation of AI. These narratives reinforce the EU's identity as both a normative power – committed to ethical governance – and a responsible power in advancing global standards for AI development. Additionally, they underscore the EU's role as a defender of LIO values, such as democracy, human rights and freedom. The study identifies two key visions of AI within these lower level narratives. The first views AI as an opportunity, emphasising its benefits, the need for a balanced approach between innovation and regulation and its potential as a strategic industry. The second frames AI as a potential threat, underscoring the importance of trustworthy AI, adherence to ethical principles (e.g., privacy and GDPR compliance), human-centred design and the protection of fundamental rights.

By examining these levels of narrative, the article argues that a comprehensive understanding of the EU's stance on AI and its evolving international identity emerges. The article has identified master narratives revolving around the identity of the EU. These are mainly constructed in opposition to the United States and China and represent the EU as a norm entrepreneur and a leader in the race to AI regulation. The two levels of narratives are inextricably linked and have shaped and reconstituted one another, enabling the EU to lead in the shaping of norms on AI at the global level and establish itself as a normative power. This article shows that EU identity is flexible and shaped by changing narratives around AI, shifting from innovation to sovereignty and norm promotion as geopolitical conditions evolve. The EU actively constructs its identity through its approach to AI governance, not just reflecting it in policy.

The article notes that setting AI norms in the EU involves political negotiation amongst stakeholders. The EU's regulatory approach shows its adaptability to digital governance challenges and highlights its growing role as a regulatory authority, despite ongoing debates about the scope and enforcement of AI regulation. Whilst EU institutions perceive the need to react to superpowers' exuberance in the AI field by pursuing their own strategy, they do not explicitly provide detailed arguments concerning its feasibility, focusing instead on the imperative to carve out a unique, values-driven path in the face of global competition.

The entrepreneurial role is particularly evident in the EU's efforts to harmonise AI governance through initiatives such as the AI Act, which combines regulatory and ethical considerations to create a standard applicable across member states. By stepping in when diverse national approaches were already underway, the EU effectively acted to bridge gaps, reduce fragmentation and establish itself as a leader in setting global AI governance standards. Future challenges will be tied to the observations made in this article: whilst the EU is considered a single actor, internal divisions and competing priorities amongst member states may significantly influence this analysis.

Whilst the article does not engage in direct comparative analysis with other powers, it provides preliminary evidence for future research. Indeed, in examining the diffusion of norms on AI on the part of the EU, the article paves the way for future studies on the

contestation of these norms by both China and the United States. Moreover, the emerging debate is whether this narrative is strategic or counterproductive for the EU in its competition with global powers. The effectiveness of the EU's approach to AI regulation is under scrutiny, and the central question remains whether it strengthens or weakens the bloc's position.

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