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Article

Automating the Nation: Generative AI, Media Discourse, and the Future of Political Communication in China

Zhiguang Yang[1,*]

[1] Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom
* Correspondence: Zhiguang Yang, Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom

Abstract: Generative artificial intelligence (AI) is rapidly transforming the landscape of political communication, profoundly affecting both the creation of media content and the governance and evolution of public discourse. This article examines the portrayal of generative AI in Chinese state media and social media, illustrating how these portrayals reflect the broader evolution of digitally mediated political communication. A mixed-methods approach combining computational text analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis is applied to detect five dominant narrative frames: technological nationalism, economic modernization, governance efficiency, ethical risk management, and public uncertainty. The results indicate that state-media texts predominantly associate generative AI with national innovation, high-quality development, and intelligent government. Conversely, concerns regarding job replacement, misinformation, algorithmic bias, and digital trust are more prevalent in social media conversations. These differences indicate that generative AI is not merely a communication tool, but a novel socio-technical infrastructure influencing the production, distribution, and interpretation of political messages. While this infrastructure enables state-oriented priorities in the Chinese context, it simultaneously generates complex challenges concerning automation, credibility, and platform-mediated discourse. Ultimately, this study contributes to the broader research on AI and political communication by theorizing generative AI as a critical discourse-shaping technology within contemporary state-society relations, offering valuable insights for future policy and governance frameworks.

Keywords: artificial intelligence; political communication; media discourse; digital governance; technological nationalism

1. Introduction

Generative artificial intelligence (AI) has transformed contemporary communication practices. Earlier digital technologies primarily relayed, circulated, and amplified content created by humans. In contrast, generative AI systems now produce text, images, audio, and video that closely resemble human-generated outputs. This shift blurs distinctions among human authorship, machine generation, and mediation. It also raises questions concerning authority, verifiability, responsibility, and influence in mediated communication. Narrative construction, dissemination, and reception are inherently tied to institutional and societal structures, a dynamic especially salient in political communication.

In China, these technological developments unfold within a distinctive media and governance environment characterized by coordinated institutional coordination, integrated platform operations, and strategic deployment of digital tools to support public communication objectives. Over the past decade, China has advanced a sophisticated digital communication ecosystem in which state-affiliated media, commercial platforms, and algorithmic systems operate in close alignment [1]. This ecosystem reflects a dynamic interplay between institutional guidance and participatory engagement—not rigidly top-down nor fully decentralized, but continuously adaptive. Integrating generative AI into this setting adds further dimensionality, enabling large-

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scale content creation while expanding capacities for narrative articulation and audience engagement.

Large language models and other generative AI systems have seen rapid adoption across China's domestic technology sector, where they are widely applied to enhance economic productivity, cultural expression, media operations, and administrative workflows [2, 3]. Concurrently, national strategies emphasize the development and integration of AI in ways that support broader societal goals, including technological advancement, industrial modernization, and harmonious social development. Within this policy and media context, generative AI functions not only as a technical instrument but also as an indicator of developmental progress and international standing. Much prior scholarship has focused on challenges such as deceptive content, synthetic media, and automated messaging within liberal democratic frameworks. While those concerns remain pertinent, they do not fully reflect the multifaceted roles generative AI assumes in contexts where institutional direction, platform governance, and market forces interact. The Chinese experience therefore merits dedicated scholarly attention when examining how generative AI is represented, interpreted, and operationalized in media discourse.

Media discourse plays a pivotal role in shaping public understanding of emerging technologies. Framing choices, topic selection, and repetition patterns in news reporting and official communications significantly influence how audiences perceive both the potential benefits and associated considerations of technological change [4]. This is especially true for generative AI, given its technical complexity, opacity, and rapid evolution. Most members of the public lack direct access to underlying models or algorithms; instead, their understanding is formed through journalistic coverage, official announcements, and discussions on digital platforms. These discursive representations do not merely mirror existing institutional arrangements—they actively contribute to reinforcing certain interpretations while limiting others. Within China's media environment, discourse is shaped by multiple actors with differing degrees of institutional affiliation and functional scope. State-affiliated media continue to anchor agenda-setting and formal communication, frequently emphasizing themes of innovation, advancement, and collective achievement. At the same time, digital platforms facilitate broader participation: individuals, commentators, and civil organizations contribute to ongoing dialogue. Though subject to established norms and operational guidelines, these spaces allow for negotiation, reinterpretation, and contextual adaptation of dominant narratives. The interplay among these communicative domains produces a layered discursive landscape where meaning is continually constructed and refined.

The application of generative AI within this media landscape affects how discourse is produced and disseminated [5]. AI systems assist human authors in drafting content or generate preliminary versions of public-facing materials—including news reports, platform posts, and administrative documents—enhancing scalability, adaptability, and responsiveness. In terms of dissemination, AI-enabled tools support content curation, prioritization, recommendation, and promotion, guided by user behavior, platform architecture, and organizational priorities. Taken together, these capabilities point toward increasing procedural integration of AI in communicative workflows. This article does not treat AI as an autonomous agent with independent intent. Instead, it conceptualizes generative AI as a socio-technical mediator embedded within human practice, institutional frameworks, commercial operations, and established oversight mechanisms.

The implications of AI-augmented communication are particularly significant in contexts where information coordination and narrative coherence support effective public administration. Generative AI can strengthen existing communication capabilities—including monitoring public sentiment, generating timely responses, and producing messages aligned with shared objectives. At the same time, wider availability of generative tools may enable diverse actors to develop complementary perspectives, creative adaptations, or informal commentary [6]. This introduces new dimensions to maintaining coherence across communicative channels while supporting pluralistic expression. Discussions about associated considerations—such as workforce transitions,

fairness in algorithmic outcomes, factual accuracy, and data handling—have also gained visibility, especially on digital platforms. These conversations reflect the broader societal process of evaluating technological possibilities alongside evolving expectations and responsibilities. Such evaluations occur within China's specific regulatory framework and cultural context, which shapes how considerations are identified, prioritized, and addressed. Given this complexity, systematic analysis is needed to understand how generative AI is portrayed and understood in Chinese media discourse. This study addresses that need by examining prevailing narratives across official and digital platforms, with particular attention to thematic emphasis, framing patterns, and affective tone. Drawing on complementary computational and interpretive methods, the analysis seeks to capture both the breadth and nuance of these discursive formations.

This article treats generative AI as a novel socio-technical infrastructure—one that reconfigures the conditions under which political communication is produced, disseminated, and interpreted—rather than as a discrete technological artifact [7]. This reconfiguration is especially evident in China, where technological development, institutional strategy, platform operation, and media discourse intersect in distinctive ways. The study pursues three interrelated questions: First, how is generative AI represented across official and digital media channels in China? Second, what thematic patterns and framing conventions characterize those representations, and how do they connect to broader societal priorities? Third, what does the integration of generative AI imply for the production, dissemination, and interpretation of political communication? These questions inform the analysis and contribute to wider academic inquiry into the relationships among AI, media, and public communication in China.

AI serves as a critical domain for investigating evolving relationships among technology, media, and institutional practice [8, 9]. As AI systems become more deeply embedded in media infrastructures, they influence not only how information is generated and distributed but also how it is contextualized, assessed, and regarded. The Chinese context provides a valuable vantage point for observing how such transformations manifest within a distinct institutional and cultural setting. Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework linking generative AI, media discourse, digital governance, and political communication.

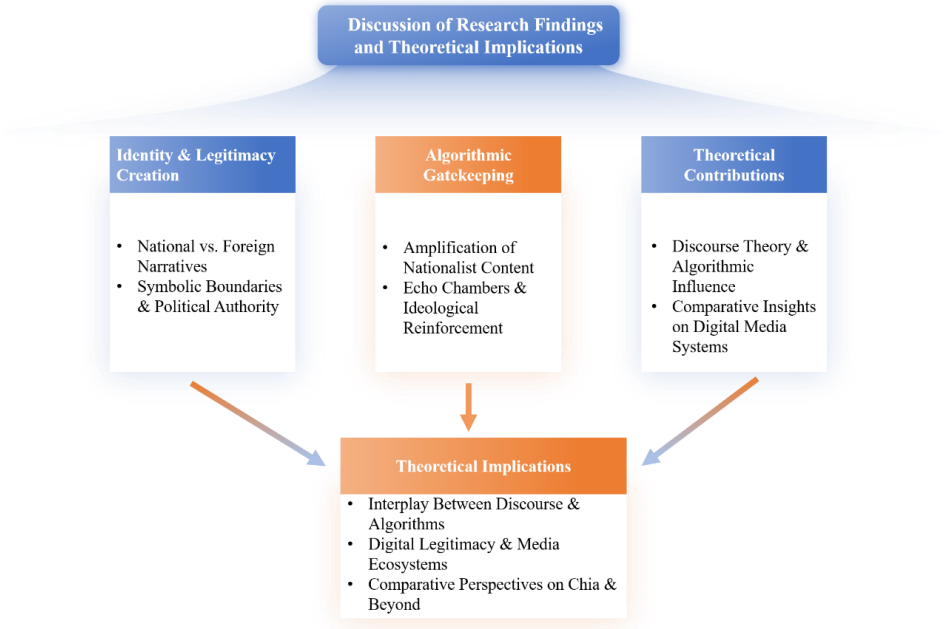


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework Linking Generative AI, Media Discourse, Digital Governance, and Political Communication.

2. Literature Review & Theoretical Framework

2.1. Generative AI and Communication

The development of generative artificial intelligence represents a significant evolution in communication research. Traditionally, media technologies have been understood as channels for information exchange among human participants. However, the emergence of advanced generative AI systems—particularly large language models—has shifted this understanding, as machines now produce contextually appropriate and adaptive content that closely resembles human-generated communication [10]. This advancement has prompted scholars to reconsider AI not merely as a tool or transmission medium, but as an active participant in discourse formation and meaning-making. Unlike earlier forms of automation, generative AI systems generate novel, situation-aware outputs with minimal human involvement, enabling the creation of news articles, social media content, and policy-related narratives. Consequently, communication processes are increasingly characterized by human–machine collaboration, complicating established notions of authorship, agency, and accountability—especially in contexts requiring careful alignment with public interest and social responsibility.

This transformation holds particular significance for political communication, where strategic information design and dissemination are central. Generative AI enhances the capacity to deliver messages at scale while tailoring them to diverse audience segments, thereby supporting more responsive and nuanced public engagement. Within China's media ecosystem—where communication practices are closely integrated with national development goals, public service objectives, and social governance priorities—generative AI serves as an important enabler for advancing media modernization and strengthening the effectiveness of public communication [11].

2.2. Media Discourse and Framing

Media discourse serves as a key mechanism for public understanding and interpretation of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence. Framing theory provides a robust analytical framework for examining how media accounts shape perception, engagement, and societal response. Rather than functioning as neutral reflectors of reality, media actively construct meaning by selecting, emphasizing, and organizing particular aspects of issues [12]. These interpretive frames significantly influence audience cognition, risk assessment, and attitude formation. Generative AI has contributed to the diversification of media narratives, which arise from varying combinations of ideological perspectives, affective appeals, and audience engagement strategies. Common thematic emphases include AI's transformative capacity, contributions to innovation, economic advancement, and social progress; conversely, other narratives foreground concerns related to misinformation, labor market shifts, and ethical implications. Multiple, often competing, frames coexist within contemporary media discourse, collectively producing a complex and sometimes inconsistent portrayal of AI.

Cultural traditions and institutional contexts shape the framing process in distinctive ways. State-affiliated media typically emphasize narratives aligned with national development priorities, portraying AI as a strategic enabler of modernization and international competitiveness. Where challenges are acknowledged, they are presented in conjunction with institutional capacity for oversight and responsible stewardship. Social media platforms, while subject to platform-level governance, accommodate a wider range of perspectives—including public sentiment and critical viewpoints—thereby contributing to a layered and evolving media ecosystem.

2.3. AI, Nationalism, and State Narratives

The connection between nationalism and artificial intelligence has become increasingly significant in research on political communication. Rather than treating AI as a purely technical innovation, this paper interprets it as a discursive object through which national identity, state capacity, and geopolitical positioning are articulated. In most

countries, AI is positioned as a strategic resource, signifying economic competitiveness, scientific advancement, and international influence [13, 14]. Such framing is particularly evident in China, where technological development is closely aligned with long-term planning, national rejuvenation, and global engagement. To maintain analytical depth, the current research draws upon three interdependent concepts: technological nationalism, media framing, and digital governance. Technological nationalism describes how AI is represented as a symbol of national strength, self-reliance, and modernization. Media framing refers to the specific narratives through which official communications and digital platforms render generative AI meaningful for broad audiences. These narratives operate within China's coordinated communication ecosystem; digital platforms function not as neutral conduits but as integral components of a structured information environment.

In this context, media discourse plays a central role in constructing generative AI as an expression of national capability. References to innovation, technological achievement, industrial transformation, and self-sufficiency consistently align it with China's broader modernization agenda [5, 15]. These narratives contribute to a form of digital nationalism in which advanced technologies are associated with national confidence, developmental progress, and international standing. Generative AI is thus positioned not only as a driver of economic and technological advancement but also as a marker of China's capacity to participate actively in global technological development. At the same time, such narratives reinforce the legitimacy of policy priorities by anchoring AI development firmly within the framework of national development goals. When media discourse presents generative AI as essential to modernization and effective governance, technological innovation transcends its domain as a specialized or sectoral concern and becomes a shared societal endeavor. This framing encourages public perception of AI not merely as an opportunity for growth, but as a collective responsibility tied to national progress. The framework therefore guides the analysis by asking how generative AI is represented in public discourse, how such representations reinforce technological nationalism, and how they reflect and sustain the practice of digitally integrated governance in China. An integrated theoretical framework for generative AI is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Integrated Theoretical Framework for Generative AI and Political Communication

Theoretical Component	Core Concept	Role in This Study
Generative AI as Socio-technical	AI assists, automates, and shapes communicative	Examines AI's role in production and narrative construction
Agenda-Setting Theory	Media influence which issues gain public attention	Analyzes how AI becomes a salient topic in media discourse
Framing Theory	Media shape interpretation through selective emphasis	Identifies dominant narratives (e.g., innovation, nationalism, risk)
Digital Nationalism	Technology is linked to national identity and competition	Explores AI as a symbol of national power and modernization
Socio-technical Imaginaries	Collective visions of technology-driven futures	Interprets how AI is embedded in visions of China's development
Digital Governance	Use of technology to manage communication and society	Contextualizes AI within state-led communication systems
Hybrid Media System	Interaction between state media and digital platforms	Examines differences between official and social media discourse

2.4. Political Communication in China

Understanding the role of generative AI in political communication requires situating it within China's broader media ecosystem. Chinese political communication operates as a hybrid system, integrating state-led agenda-setting, platform-based

governance, and diverse forms of online public engagement. State-affiliated media institutions continue to serve as primary channels for official discourse, while digital platforms facilitate participation by a wider range of actors in public discussion [16].

Weibo and WeChat have evolved into key platforms for information dissemination and public deliberation [17]. Although subject to regulatory oversight, these platforms support structured interaction between governmental bodies and citizens, enabling adaptive and responsive communication processes. This hybrid architecture involves multiple stakeholders in the co-production and circulation of public discourse.

Digital technologies are increasingly embedded in governance and communication strategies. Digital governance encompasses the application of technological tools to improve administrative efficiency, information management, and citizen engagement. Generative AI extends these capabilities by supporting advanced content creation and audience-specific personalization [18]. It enables rapid generation and targeted delivery of messages tailored to distinct demographic or contextual profiles, thereby expanding reach and enhancing communicative impact.

At the same time, the integration of AI into communication systems introduces important considerations regarding oversight, explainability, and public confidence. While AI can strengthen communication effectiveness, it also presents challenges related to information integrity, algorithmic fairness, and content authenticity. These issues hold particular relevance in China's media environment, where the balance between institutional guidance and public participation is a defining feature [19, 20].

2.5. Theoretical Framework

The present research constructs a comprehensive hybrid theoretical framework incorporating agenda-setting theory, framing theory, digital nationalism, and socio-technical imaginaries based on the aforementioned literature [21]. This theoretical perspective conceptualizes generative artificial intelligence as a socio-technical actor embedded within a dynamic system of media discourse and political communication. Agenda-setting theory provides the essential foundation for explaining why artificial intelligence-related issues are consistently brought to the forefront of public discussion. Media actors establish the public agenda by carefully selecting issues deemed significant. Generative artificial intelligence significantly enhances this process by enabling the rapid generation and widespread proliferation of content, thereby reinforcing specific topics and narratives. Framing theory serves as a complementary perspective to this approach, as it examines how these issues are contextualized and how media contributes to shaping meaning and public perception.

Digital nationalism introduces a distinct political dimension to the concept, establishing a profound relationship among technology, national identity, national strategy, national aspirations, national imagination, and overall national progress. Along with socio-technical imaginaries, it facilitates a deeper understanding of the shared visions of an artificial intelligence-driven future, considering the construction of media discourse where technological innovation is intrinsically linked to governance capacity, national competitiveness, and broad social transformation [22, 23]. The proposed framework thus integrates the core concepts of agenda setting and framing, technological nationalism, and digital governance, while also acknowledging the complex interplay between state direction and online public participation. The conceptual connection between generative artificial intelligence and political communication within the Chinese media system is comprehensively depicted in Figure 2.

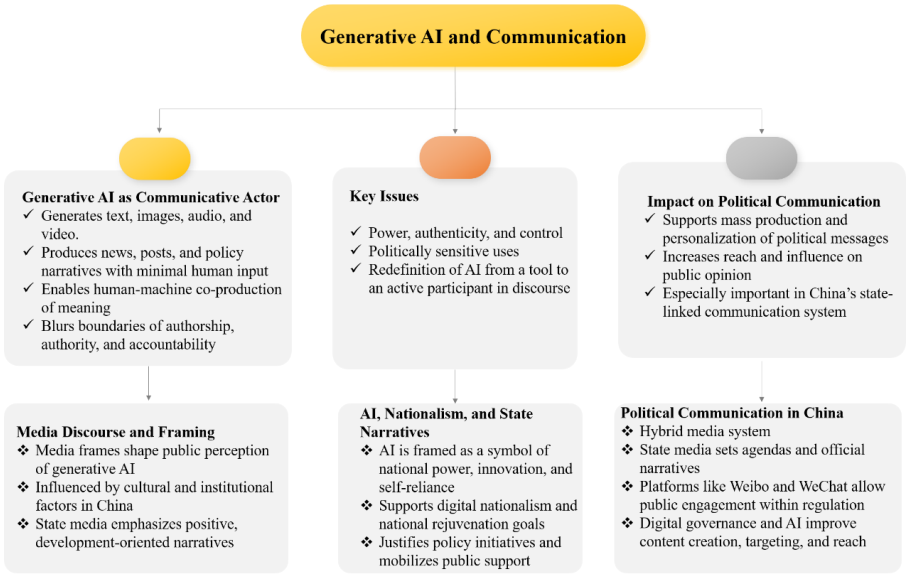


Figure 2. Generative AI and Political Communication in the Chinese Media System.

3. Data, Design, and Analytical Framework

3.1. Research Design

The study employed a multidisciplinary approach to textual analysis, integrating computational and critical discourse methods. Computational techniques were first applied to detect macro-level patterns across the corpus, including keyword frequencies, topic distributions, sentiment trends, and co-occurrence networks. Prominent thematic frames identified around generative AI encompass technological advancement, economic modernization, administrative efficiency, and responsible risk governance [21, 24]. Subsequently, critical discourse analysis was conducted on representative texts within each frame to examine how generative AI is discursively situated in relation to national development priorities, institutional capacity, public confidence, and governance practices. This dual methodology—combining large-scale textual mapping with interpretive close reading—enabled the identification of both broad discursive tendencies and context-specific rhetorical constructions that confer political significance upon generative AI.

Generative AI functions as a socio-technical mediator within media and political communication systems. Topic modelling and sentiment analysis were used to uncover aggregate patterns in the corpus, while qualitative critical discourse analysis was applied to examine framing strategies, rhetorical devices, narrative structures, and underlying ideological assumptions.

3.2. Data Collection

This dual-source design reflects the hybrid structure of the Chinese media environment, where centralised official discourse interacts with more decentralised forms of online participation [25]. State-media data were collected from major official Chinese media sources, including national newspapers, news agencies, and state-affiliated online outlets. These sources were selected because of their central role in agenda-setting and in circulating official narratives on technological development, governance, and national policy. The corpus consisted of online articles, commentaries, and news items that mentioned generative AI using keywords such as artificial intelligence, generative AI, large language models, AI-generated content, ChatGPT, AIGC, and foundation models.

The collection period covered the phase during which generative AI emerged as a prominent topic in global technological and policy discussions. This timeframe encompassed the rapid uptake of large language models, the introduction of domestic generative AI applications, and the formulation of guidance frameworks concerning AI

governance. As a result, the dataset captured both international technological developments and corresponding domestic responses [26]. The gathered texts were analyzed chronologically to identify patterns in media attention over time. Coverage intensified around high-profile AI-related events, such as the global adoption of ChatGPT, the launch of Chinese large language model products, major technology conferences, and the release of guidance documents related to generative AI. These instances indicated that technological innovation was not the sole driver of state-media attention; priorities related to policy implementation, national development goals, and international technological positioning also shaped coverage. In general, the state-media corpus supported analysis of how official discourse positioned generative AI within themes of innovation, modernization, administrative capability, and national competitiveness. By tracking recurring themes and shifts in emphasis, the study examined how Chinese state media situated generative AI within broader narratives of technological advancement and digitally enabled national development.

The data for this study come from three major social media platforms in China: Weibo, official WeChat accounts, and Zhihu. These platforms were selected because they reflect various dimensions of public engagement with generative AI. Weibo serves as a venue for rapid public reactions and hashtag-facilitated discussion. WeChat's official accounts support longer-form explanatory, institutional, and semi-professional commentary, while Zhihu functions as a question-and-answer platform for expert interpretations and user-generated debate.

Weibo was included due to its responsiveness and outward-facing communication dynamics, enabling capture of immediate public reactions to news events, product launches, policy announcements, and public controversies. Its communication patterns are characterised by timeliness, reposting, hashtag usage, visibility, and interaction. Thus, Weibo data proved valuable for identifying shifts in public attention, sentiment, and thematic focus surrounding generative AI. WeChat official accounts were included because they serve primarily as publishing channels for media organisations, institutions, experts, enterprises, and semi-professional commentators—rather than open discussion forums. These materials therefore contributed insights into more considered framings of generative AI in relation to technological innovation, economic transformation, and governance approaches. Zhihu was included because it supports structured question-and-answer exchanges and extended user-generated explanations. Distinct from Weibo and WeChat in communicative logic, Zhihu users often engage topics with domain familiarity, personal experience, technical understanding, and analytical depth. Accordingly, Zhihu data reflected knowledge-oriented public reflections on the broader societal implications of generative AI, including effects on employment, education, ethical considerations, information reliability, and social cohesion. All three social media sources underwent identical preprocessing: duplicate content, advertisements, off-topic posts, and non-substantive material were removed. Chinese-language texts were segmented using natural language processing tools, personal identifiers were anonymised where applicable, and common stop words were excluded.

3.3. Analytical Methods

The analysis is conducted in three key steps: topic modeling, sentiment analysis, and critical discourse analysis. Together, these approaches address complementary dimensions of the research question and collectively illuminate the broader discourse surrounding artificial intelligence. Topic modeling is initially performed using Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) to identify dominant thematic structures within the textual corpus. This method detects recurring lexical patterns by clustering co-occurring terms into interpretable themes. Topics are refined through iterative testing and coherence evaluation to ensure conceptual clarity and analytical utility. Final topic labels and groupings reflect substantive content domains such as technological innovation, economic development, governance frameworks, and ethical considerations.

Second, sentiment analysis is applied to assess the affective orientation of AI-related discourse across diverse communicative contexts. Given the Chinese-language composition of the corpus, linguistic specificity and contextual appropriateness are prioritized throughout the process. Automated sentiment classification serves as a preliminary, indicative tool rather than a definitive metric. Computational outputs are systematically validated against manually annotated samples to confirm reliability. In addition to broad valence categories—positive, neutral, and negative—the interpretation incorporates nuanced affective dimensions, including optimism, caution, technological confidence, national pride, and concern regarding potential societal implications.

Third, critical discourse analysis is employed to investigate underlying meanings, ideological assumptions, and institutional positioning embedded in AI discourse. This qualitative approach explores how language constructs social realities by framing artificial intelligence as a technological, economic, political, and cultural phenomenon. CDA examines rhetorical strategies, narrative structures, recurrent metaphors, and implicit power relations within selected texts [15, 27]. It further situates these texts within their broader socio-political environments of production, dissemination, and reception. When integrated with sentiment analysis, this method enables a move beyond aggregate emotional assessment toward a deeper understanding of how specific evaluations of AI intersect with institutional priorities, governance agendas, and divergent conceptions of technological progress.

3.4. Variables and Analytical Framework

To ensure analytical rigor, the study defines a set of core variables and constructs an integrated analytical framework grounded in the theoretical foundations outlined earlier. These variables collectively capture key dimensions of AI-related discourse. First, thematic content serves as a primary dimension, encompassing categories such as innovation, national development, governance, and risk assessment. These categories are applied to classify dominant topics emerging from topic modeling outputs and to examine thematic distribution across diverse media sources [28]. Second, sentiment and tonal orientation constitute a distinct analytical axis, capturing the emotional valence and intensity of discourse and its variation across platforms and temporal periods. Third, framing analysis focuses on identifying prevailing narratives, their underlying assumptions, and the positioning of AI within broader socio-political contexts—such as national advancement strategies or global technological competition. Fourth, actor typology distinguishes among state-affiliated media, platform-based digital media, and individual users, enabling comparative analysis of narrative generation, amplification, and dissemination patterns. Collectively, these variables inform an analytical framework that emphasizes the dynamic interplay among discourse production, narrative framing, and information circulation, while also considering the evolving role of generative AI as a participant in communicative processes (As shown in Table 2).

Table 2. Summary of Methodological Design and Analytical Components:

Component	Description	Purpose in Study
Research Design	Mixed-method (computational + qualitative analysis)	Captures both large-scale patterns and nuanced interpretations
Data Sources	State media and social media platforms	Reflects hybrid media system in China
Timeframe	2022–2025	Covers key period of generative AI expansion
Topic Modeling (LDA)	Identifies dominant themes in discourse	Reveals key narratives (e.g., innovation, governance, nationalism)
Sentiment Analysis	Classifies emotional tone (positive, negative, neutral)	Assesses public and media attitudes toward AI

Critical Discourse Analysis	Examines language, framing, and power relations	Interprets ideological and political meanings
Key Variables	Themes, sentiment, framing, actor type	Structures analysis and comparison

4. Findings and Analysis

4.1. Dominant Themes in AI Media Discourse

Two key methods used to analyse Chinese media discourse on generative AI were topic modelling and qualitative interpretation of data collected from state media and social media. Several major thematic clusters were identified using these approaches. For ease of analysis, representative keywords and interpretive labels are presented for each theme. The following four themes were identified: technological innovation, national development and competitiveness, governance frameworks, and ethical and social considerations. Keywords linked to the theme of technological innovation included large language models, algorithms, applications, productivity, automation, chatbots, and content generation. This theme was frequently associated with China's scientific achievements, industrial modernisation, and leadership in the global AI sector in state media [29]. On social media, it appeared in more experiential terms, such as user interactions with AI writing tools, chatbots, image-generating platforms, and workplace automation.

National development and competitiveness constitute another prominent theme. Generative AI is portrayed as a strategic enabler aligned with broader objectives of modernisation and technological self-reliance. State media narratives tend to position AI as a contributor to national capability, economic advancement, and international standing. While social media users demonstrate awareness of such framing, they also express curiosity and engage in discussion regarding the geopolitical dimensions of AI development, particularly in relation to comparative progress with other major economies. A third key theme concerns governance frameworks, encompassing policy guidance and institutional oversight. State media emphasises the importance of responsible deployment, ethical alignment, and adherence to established standards. Social media discourse reflects a nuanced stance—acknowledging the need for structured oversight while also raising questions about transparency, fairness, and appropriate application of AI technologies.

Finally, ethical and societal implications emerge as a recurring theme, especially on social media. Topics such as employment transitions, data protection, information integrity, and the reliability of AI-generated content are widely discussed. User responses reflect both interest and prudence, indicating an evolving public dialogue about the transformative potential of AI and its integration into everyday life.

4.2. Sentiment and Framing Patterns

Sentiment analysis indicates that state media coverage of generative AI is generally positive or neutral [30]. A positive tone predominates in reports on technological advancement, national innovation, and industrial transformation, while a neutral tone characterizes explanatory reporting on policy implementation, technical applications, and governance approaches. Negative or apprehensive sentiment is relatively rare in state media but occurs more often in social media discussions concerning misinformation, ethical considerations, workforce transitions, data security, and system limitations.

Framing analysis reveals that state media primarily employs frames centered on national capability and scientific advancement. Artificial intelligence is consistently portrayed as a driver of economic development and a cornerstone of technological autonomy, reinforcing the broader narrative of digital sovereignty. In contrast, social media framing is more heterogeneous, encompassing both optimistic and critical perspectives. Common themes include ethical reflection, impacts on employment structures, and concerns about information reliability. This contrast reflects the dual-layered nature of China's media environment—featuring coordinated institutional communication alongside diverse, user-generated discourse.

The interplay between sentiment and framing shows that state media discourse typically situates artificial intelligence within narratives of confidence, modernization, and strategic alignment, whereas social media discourse expresses a broader spectrum of affective and evaluative positions. These variations should not be interpreted as representative of aggregate public opinion, but rather as manifestations of how distinct communicative platforms shape and foreground particular assessments of AI.

4.3. Differences Across Media Platforms

A comparative analysis of media platforms reveals notable variations in discourse patterns. State media employs formal, policy-oriented language aligned with national development priorities, consistently emphasizing government-sponsored AI initiatives, technological progress, and regulatory frameworks. These narratives prioritize authority, consistency, societal utility, and long-term strategic value. In contrast, social media features a more informal, interactive, and heterogeneous communication style. User-generated content—including posts, comments, and discussions—frequently reflects personal experiences, exploratory inquiry, and critical reflection. Real-world applications of AI tools are commonly cited, alongside ethical questions and evaluations of specific implementations. Engagement metrics such as likes, shares, and comments indicate higher user interaction with content addressing risks, ethical dilemmas, or high-impact AI applications, reflecting platform-specific dynamics of attention and participation [31].

These distinctions illustrate the characteristics of China's integrated media ecosystem, where state media functions as a top-down mechanism for public communication, while social media serves as a decentralized space for dialogue, negotiation, and diverse interpretation of issues. Generative AI is increasingly embedded within both domains—not only as a subject of public discourse but also as an active tool for content generation—thereby further converging the roles of content creation and consumption [32].

4.4. Interaction of AI, Nationalism, and Governance

The results also shed light on the interplay among AI, national development narratives, and institutional frameworks in Chinese media discourse. AI discourse in state media consistently emphasizes the country's technological advancement and global competitiveness at the national level. This aligns with concepts of digital development that prioritize technological capability, international standing, and coordinated innovation efforts. Artificial intelligence is framed as a strategic public asset that strengthens national capacity and features prominently in national planning documents, including the New Generation Artificial Intelligence Development Plan. Generative AI findings, patterns, and platform differences in Chinese media are shown in Figure 3.

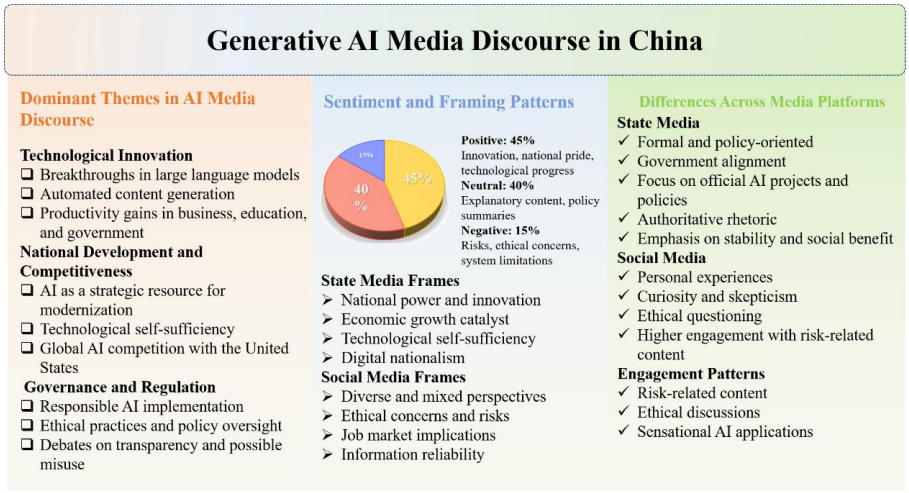


Figure 3. Generative AI in Chinese Media Findings, Patterns, and Platform Differences.

Although similar themes appear in social-media discourse, they are articulated with greater diversity and nuance. Some users affirm national progress by highlighting technological milestones, while others examine societal implications, ethical considerations, or policy implementation challenges. These exchanges reflect a dynamic communicative environment where officially aligned narratives coexist with diverse user-generated perspectives. Institutional frameworks serve as a unifying reference point across both state and social media, as standards for responsible development—encompassing technical integrity, ethical alignment, and oversight mechanisms—are consistently emphasized (As shown in Table 3).

Table 3. Summary of Dominant Themes, Sentiment, and Platform Differences:

Theme	State Media Emphasis	Social Media Emphasis	Sentiment Profile
Technological Innovation	Breakthroughs, large language models, and productivity	Personal use, AI tools, practical examples	Positive/Neutral
National Development & Competitiveness	Economic growth, global Leadership, and national pride	Geopolitical debate, curiosity about AI competition	Positive/Neutral
Governance & Regulation	Policy, ethical standards, and responsible deployment	Regulation concerns, transparency, censorship	Neutral/Negative
Ethical & Social Implications	Occasionally discussed, aligned with governance messages	Job displacement, data privacy, misinformation	Negative/Neutral

State media tends to position AI within national strategy and emphasize beneficial developmental outcomes, whereas social media functions as a more interactive space where optimism, hands-on engagement, cautious inquiry, and constructive critique coexist. These patterns underscore the significance of platform-specific dynamics, rhetorical framing, and affective orientation when analyzing AI's evolving role in public communication and policy-related discourse.

5. The Discursive Role of Generative AI in Political Communication

5.1. Interpreting the Role of Generative AI in Media Discourse

Generative AI is framed not merely as a technological tool but as a socio-technical infrastructure that shapes public discourse. In official media, it is associated with national advancement, technological capability, and international competitiveness. On social media platforms, similar themes appear alongside a broader spectrum of perspectives—including interest, hands-on engagement, constructive critique, and ethical reflection. This reflects the coexistence of centralized, authoritative communication channels and decentralized, interactive digital spaces. The interplay between these environments enables ongoing dialogue between institutional priorities and public interpretation, fostering a dynamic communicative landscape. Within this context, generative AI functions both as a subject of discussion and an active participant—constituted through narratives, values, and human interaction [33, 34]. It has become emblematic of national development goals, technological modernization, and forward-looking governance approaches. Consequently, generative AI does not merely transmit information; it contributes to cultural and political meaning-making related to digital innovation and public administration.

5.2. AI as a Communicative Actor and Political Tool

The project demonstrates that generative AI challenges the traditional view of media as a passive medium of communication. However, this study does not conceptualize AI

as an autonomous actor possessing independent agency. Instead, generative AI is understood as a socio-technical mediator and communicative infrastructure that shapes how content is produced, distributed, filtered, and interpreted. AI also functions as a discursive object—serving as a focal point for broader discussions concerning technology, governance, national development, and social transformation.

Within the Chinese context, this mediating role carries notable implications for public communication. Integration of generative AI into state media systems, digital platform infrastructures, and automated content-production workflows can strengthen institutional capacity to advance preferred narratives, guide public discourse, and articulate a vision of technological progress aligned with strategic national priorities. State media narratives on AI consistently emphasize innovation, responsible deployment, ethical considerations, and national competitiveness. AI is thus understood not as a neutral technical tool, but as an integral element of a complex socio-technical ecosystem encompassing state institutions, media organizations, digital platforms, algorithmic systems, and policy frameworks. At the same time, social media discourse reveals that AI-related communication is not exclusively top-down. Users actively interpret, question, critique, and share AI-related content [35, 36]. They discuss practical applications—including chatbots, writing assistants, and automated content-generation tools—and collectively examine their ethical, societal, and functional dimensions. These engagements enable users to co-shape AI discourse rather than merely receive messages from official or platform sources. The interplay between human responses and AI-generated outputs forms a dynamic feedback process: AI systems help structure and amplify certain communicative patterns, while users respond, reinterpret, and sometimes contest those outputs. This ongoing interaction continuously reshapes public understanding of AI, without implying deterministic influence. Rather, generative AI operates as a mediator, infrastructure, and discursive object embedded within intersecting political, technological, institutional, and social dynamics.

5.3. Nationalism, Governance, and the Ethics of AI

The intersection of AI, national development, and governance constitutes a central theme in contemporary discourse. State media consistently position AI as a strategic component of national advancement, emphasizing its role in enhancing technological capability and global standing. This perspective reflects broader policy priorities that emphasize self-reliance in core technologies and leadership in emerging fields [37, 38].

Social media discussions reveal greater complexity: while many users express pride in domestic AI achievements, others raise thoughtful considerations regarding labor market transitions and broader societal implications [32]. Governance functions as a coordinating framework—supporting innovation, ensuring alignment with public interest, and promoting the responsible deployment of AI systems. These dynamics indicate that public communication around AI is not unidirectional, but rather involves ongoing alignment between institutional narratives and diverse civic perspectives.

Ethical dimensions feature prominently in online discourse, as users engage with questions about AI's societal impact and appropriate implementation pathways [39, 40]. Such engagement underscores the importance of inclusive dialogue in shaping policy direction, fostering social consensus, and guiding ethical practice. The coexistence of state-supported optimism and cautious public reflection contributes to a multifaceted, evolving understanding of AI's role in China's development trajectory.

5.4. Implications for Political Communication

The findings have several implications for understanding political communication in contemporary China [38]. First, the integration of AI into media systems may enhance the capacity of state and platform actors to shape narratives, align communication with strategic objectives, and tailor messages to diverse audiences. Generative AI supports scalable and adaptive content production, though such capabilities do not inherently dictate public interpretation.

Second, the hybrid media environment—characterized by the coexistence of state-controlled and social media platforms—enables dynamic interaction, feedback, and public participation [13]. Social media facilitates audience engagement with AI-generated content, allows for diverse interpretations, and supports collective sense-making, thereby enriching traditional top-down models of political communication with more participatory, multi-layered, and co-constructed dimensions.

5.5. Integrating Findings with Theory

The theoretical framework is broadly supported by the empirical findings. Agenda-setting is evident in the prominence of AI-related topics in state media coverage, particularly innovation, national development, and governance. Framing theory helps explain how AI is selectively represented through narratives of technological progress, ethical oversight, risk mitigation, and national pride. Digital nationalism appears in the repeated presentation of AI as an instrument of national strength, technological self-reliance, and global competitiveness. Socio-technical imaginaries are also visible in the shared visions of an AI-shaped future that circulate across both state and social media (As shown in Table 4).

Table 4. Summary of Discussion, AI's Role, Framing, and Implications.

Dimension	Key Findings	Theoretical Alignment	Implications
AI as Socio-technical Mediator	Media systems	Agenda-setting, Framing	Traditional channel-based communication models
AI as Political Tool	Digital nationalism and policy goals	Digital Nationalism	Scalable and adaptive political communication
Nationalism and Governance	State frames AI as national power; social media raises ethical and societal concerns	Digital Nationalism, Socio-technical Imaginaries	Highlights the negotiation between official narratives and public perspectives
Ethical and Social Implications	Concerns about privacy, job displacement, and misinformation	Socio-technical Imaginaries	Calls for responsible AI deployment and public engagement
Hybrid Media Environment	State media and social media	Framing, Agenda-setting	A dynamic model of political communication shaped by both institutional power and user participation

AI in China sits at the intersection of media and technology. It functions as a socio-technical mediator, a strategic resource, and a symbol of national modernity. The hybrid media ecosystem allows official interpretations to circulate while also enabling public discussion and reflection. The findings therefore demonstrate the value of combining computational mapping with discourse analysis to understand the evolving relationship between AI, media, and society [22].

6. Conclusion

This article has examined the representation of generative AI in Chinese state and social media and how these representations relate to broader shifts in political communication, national discourse, and digital governance. The findings indicate that state media primarily frames generative AI as a driver of national development, technological advancement, industrial transformation, and governance modernisation. In this framing, AI is closely associated with state capacity, national identity, and policy legitimacy. In contrast, social media hosts a more diverse and dynamic range of perspectives—expressing optimism about productivity and innovation, while also

voicing concerns regarding misinformation, privacy, employment impacts, algorithmic fairness, and public trust. This divergence underscores the hybrid nature of political communication in contemporary China. Official narratives tend to foreground technological promise, coordinated policy implementation, and collective progress, whereas social media discourse reflects varied responses shaped by everyday experience, socioeconomic context, ethical reflection, and participatory dialogue. These differences affirm that users actively engage in constructing, questioning, and interpreting the social meanings attached to AI—not merely receiving top-down messages.

The article contributes to conceptualising generative AI as a socio-technical mediator within a complex media and political ecosystem. Its influence on communication arises not only from its outputs but also from how it is portrayed, regulated, perceived, and contested. However, the study has limitations, particularly its exclusive reliance on media and social media texts, and its absence of direct analysis of audience interpretation, institutional decision-making processes, or the internal functioning of AI systems. To deepen understanding of the socio-political production, interpretation, and governance of AI-mediated political communication, future research could adopt multimodal methodologies—including discourse analysis, interviews, platform audits, ethnographic observation, or cross-national comparison.

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