Volume 13 Number 8 October 2025

Digital Journalism

DIGITAL JOURNALISM

Routledge

ISSN: 2167-0811 (Print) 2167-082X (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rdij20

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To cite this article: Sisanda Nkoala, Trust Matsilele, Musawenkosi Ndlovu & Tanja Bosch (04 Jul 2025): AI Hype Through an African Lens: A Critical Analysis of Language as Symbolic Action in Online News Publications, Digital Journalism, DOI: 10.1080/21670811.2025.2528052

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2025.2528052

Published online: 04 Jul 2025.

DIGITAL JOURNALISM
https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2025.2528052

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

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AI Hype Through an African Lens: A Critical Analysis of Language as Symbolic Action in Online News Publications

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ABSTRACT

News media play a crucial role in shaping a public understanding of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and influencing how society interacts with this technology, often contributing to AI hype. This is particularly significant in Africa, where unique socioeconomic dynamics and historical relationships with technology shape news discourse on AI. However, there is limited understanding of how African news media contribute to AI hype. To address this, this study analysed news reportage on AI in online publications ($n = 724$) from 26 Anglophone African countries published in national and regional outlets between 1 June 2022 and 31 December 2023. Using content analysis and drawing on the Burkean notion of language as symbolic action, we examine how these publications frame AI and contribute to its hype. Our findings reveal a bias: Western authors dominate coverage and consistently focus on AI's technical and economic aspects, with AI-related articles predominantly appearing in technology (36%) and business (19%) sections. This emphasis on tools and solutions suggests a utilitarian view of AI, prioritising practical applications over broader societal implications. By employing a structured approach to analyse various elements of news articles, this study develops a framework for examining and understanding how African news media fuels AI hype in public discourse.

KEYWORDS

Artificial intelligence; language as symbolic action; African news reports; online news discourse; AI hype

Introduction

AI hype, namely the "trending global fixation and prioritisation of AI-related technologies, ideas and investments" (Markelius et al. 2024: 727), is a decades-old phenomenon that has characterised public discourse on AI since the term emerged in the 1950s. Often contrasted with the notion of an "AI winter," which denotes periods of diminished interest and investment in AI technologies (Dežman 2024), it manifests in exaggerated language, overly optimistic or pessimistic views, and significant investments in AI. However, while speculation and promises of real-world effects drive it,

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it also amplifies AI's capabilities and potential beyond current realities, with news media playing a crucial role (Neumark 2024: 528). Markelius et al. (2024: 728) describe AI hype as "a socio-technical narrative… spun through a multitude of mechanisms," including media framing and rhetorical devices.

News media shape public understanding of AI and influence how society interacts with these technologies (Roberge, Senneville, and Morin 2020; Sartori and Theodorou 2022). For many, especially those who have not sought more knowledge about AI elsewhere, these platforms are a primary source of information (Broussard et al. 2019; Diakopoulos 2019). This is particularly significant in Africa, where unique historical and socioeconomic contexts shape how AI is understood and adopted (Nguyen and Hekman 2024). Colonial legacies and uneven technology transfer have produced complex relationships with technological development (Ade-Ibijola and Okonkwo 2023), influencing concerns about AI's role and impact. Consequently, how African news media represent and frame AI carries significant weight in shaping broader public discourse.

African news media operate within this layered landscape, balancing coverage of AI's economic promises with concerns about its social implications (Brokensha 2020; Mohammed et al. 2024). Reporting often frames AI in binaries, either as an unequivocal boon or an existential threat, mirroring the global media's oscillation between optimism and alarm (Dežman 2024: 743). Yet these discourses are also sites where historical power dynamics and contemporary inequalities play out, as African journalists and audiences navigate what AI might mean in their contexts. In addition to the symbolic work of language, digital infrastructures shape how news content is surfaced and circulated. Algorithmic Gatekeeping Theory (Tufekci 2015) and Platform Power Theory (Helmond 2015) provide insights into how platform algorithms prioritise certain narratives, reinforcing dominant discourses and potentially marginalising alternative or critical perspectives. While this study primarily focuses on the symbolic role of language in news discourse, these theories help contextualise the broader information ecosystem, a theme we return to in the Discussion section below.

This study focuses on understanding how AI hype is produced and sustained in African online news publications. Using Kenneth Burke's Burke (1966) concept of language as symbolic action, it examines how language in African news media creates shared perspectives, frames AI as an economic and technological imperative, and potentially marginalises social and ethical concerns. By analysing 724 articles from 26 Anglophone African countries (1 June 2022 to 31 December 2023), we provide a framework for understanding how African news media contribute to AI hype and the broader narratives that shape public perceptions of AI on the continent. Our mixed-methods approach involved content analysis, quantifying AI-related terms and publication sections, and qualitative analysis grounded in Kenneth Burke's notion of language as symbolic action. This structured methodology allowed us to identify biases, dominant narratives, and thematic patterns within the discourse.

Literature Review

Over the last decade, AI has become increasingly prevalent in newsrooms, prompting global scholarly debates, including among African scholars, about its adverse effects on journalism, particularly regarding quality and ethics (Noain-Sánchez 2022). Guanah,

Agbanu, and Obi (2020) explored AI and journalism practice in Nigeria, concluding that it is not a threat given slow technological adoption. Gondwe (2025) draws on interviews with African journalists to show varied positive and negative attitudes towards AI in African newsrooms.

In South Africa, Munoriyarwa, Chiumbu, and Motsaathebe (2023) argue that there has been a slow, varied, but methodical uptake of AI practices. They find AI is used alongside scepticism, resonating with Makwambeni, Matsilele, and Bulani (2023), who found mixed feelings: dystopia around fear of job losses (especially in economically depressed newsrooms) and utopia around automating mundane tasks. In East Africa, Dralega (2023) surveyed journalists and found varied AI adoption, with generally positive attitudes from journalists and negative ones from management. These studies align with Beckett and Yaseen (2023) global study on AI adoption in news production, confirming that, as with the rest of the world, Africa has seen varied uptake, accompanying fears, and knowledge gaps.

As with studies on newsroom AI tool adoption, there is growing research on related media reportage on AI. These studies highlight the role of news discourse and framing in AI hype. Eke and Ogoh (2022) show that stories from Africa about AI are often not included in global discussions, which might affect how AI technology is developed and used on the continent. Other studies argue that reportage on technology on this continent uniquely frames these technologies as either progressive or exploitative, without acknowledging the agency of Indigenous communities (Mabweazara 2016; Shizha 2016; Bassey 2019). Brokensha's (2020) article is one of the few that has explored how AI is reported in African news. Their work examines whether AI is framed as a friend or foe and analyses journalists' framing devices to depict this technology. Wairegi, Omino, and Rutenberg (2021) characterise news media as "first-tier sources" in Africa, indicating their high reliability and accuracy in gathering information on AI technology and stakeholders. They analyse open-access material, including news articles, websites, corporate documents, academic articles, NGO reports, expert submissions, and other public sources, to determine the AI technology and AI stakeholders present in Africa, to explore the development and adoption of AI technologies in Africa, suggesting news outlets are considered highly credible sources for understanding the African AI ecosystem.

From a global perspective, Nguyen and Hekman's (2024) study of AI news framing in The New York Times, The Guardian, Wired, and Gizmodo found that media discourse on AI became more critical in the mid-2010s as the technology became common. Reports often focused on negative aspects of data-driven technology, like privacy invasion and unfair algorithmic decisions. This means that the news stories we encounter frequently focus on the potential harms of AI, like invading personal privacy or perpetuating bias. This is one of a few studies highlighting the pessimistic orientation of news reports on AI. Sun et al. (2020) analysed AI coverage in four mainstream US newspapers, finding journalists frame AI as a "viable solution to common problems" like the economy or health, fostering interest across sectors. Similarly, Branter and Saurwein (2021) show optimistic Austrian media coverage of automation. Parratt-Fernández, Chaparro-Domínguez, and Martín-Sánchez (2024) also found that Spanish media generally frames journalistic AI by its benefits rather than risks. Choi (2024) shows that near-future AI temporal framing, versus distant-future, increases perceived AI risk severity, still fueling AI hype, but from a pessimistic view.

These studies have characterised how AI hype in news media appears, consistently highlighting its optimistic tone and reliance on buzzwords to capture attention, while also recognising that hype can be linked to pessimism, fuelling fear.

Despite growing research on AI and journalism, a significant gap remains. More large-scale studies are needed on how African news media report on AI, primarily through a critical lens, analysing potential biases from historical colonial technological perspectives. No studies appear to link African news media and AI hype specifically. This study aims to analyse news perspectives on AI in Africa, focusing on online news reports as cultural artefacts that shape meaning amidst the latest AI hype, which Markelius et al. (2024: 727) state "surpasses previous periods [of AI hype] in the history of AI."

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach by quantifying the usage of AI terms across various online news publications and sections within those publications, and then using a qualitative analysis to explore the emphasis and perspectives reflected in the usage of these terms. This is a commonly used methodology for analysing news media content (Archibald et al. 2015; Nkoala, 2022). The news articles were obtained from CivicSignal (2024), "the research and analysis programme of Code for Africa, the continent's largest network of indigenous African civic technology and investigative data journalism laboratories." The data are publicly available upon registration on the organisation's website. We used the MediaCloud Explorer tool, which allows one to "search half a billion stories from more than 50,000 sources, including online news and blogs" (CivicSignal 2024). Table 1 provides an overview of the results obtained per country.

Data Collection and Sampling

We utilised CivicSignal (2024) and MediaCloud Explorer to access various online news articles from African countries. We initially retrieved all available news collections

Table 1. Number of stories collected based on CivicSignal search.

Countries where collections existed and they returned a result within our date range	Countries where collections existed but did not return a result within our date range	Countries where no relevant collections existed
Algeria (13), Angola (1), Rwanda (65), Zimbabwe (21), South Africa (19166), Uganda (958), Sudan (300), Senegal (21), Ghana (4017), Ethiopia (322), South Sudan (12), Central African Republic (1), Nigeria (13254), Kenya (4181), Benin (4), Botswana (52), Burkino Faso (5), Cameroon (21), Chad (24), Democratic Republic of Congo (8), Gambia (19), Liberia (43), Libya (370), Malawi (121), Mali (338), Mauritius (92), Morocco (42), Namibia (151), Niger (2), Seychelles (18), Sierra Leone (79), Somalia (89), Tanzania (352), Togo (5), Tunisia (14), Zambia (190), Burundi (5), Egypt (167), Equatorial Guinea (8), Zimbabwe (21)	Comoros, Cape Verde, Republic of Congo, Djibouti, Gabon, Guinea Bissau, Lesotho, Madagascar, Mauritania, Mozambique, Sao Tome and Principe, Djibouti	Cote d'Ivoire, Eritrea, Eswatini, Madera
Total URLs obtained: 44572		

related to African countries within the specified date range. This initial retrieval resulted in a dataset of 44,572 URLs, as shown in Table 1. We applied a headline-based filter to narrow the focus to articles explicitly addressing AI. Specifically, we searched for articles with the phrases "artificial intelligence" or "AI" appearing in the headline. This step was crucial because headlines are designed to convey the core topic of an article (Kuiken et al. 2017), ensuring we captured content where AI was a primary focus. This filter reduced the dataset to 7,699 articles from 26 countries.

We then categorised the remaining 7,699 articles by country of origin. This revealed a significant skewing in the dataset, with South Africa and Nigeria contributing 73% of the articles. We implemented a stratified random sampling strategy to mitigate this bias and ensure broader representation. For South Africa, Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, Libya, and Uganda (the countries with the largest number of articles), we randomly selected 100 articles from each. The random selection was performed using a random number generator within Excel, assigning a random number to each article, sorting by that number, and selecting the first 100. For the remaining 20 countries, where the number of articles was smaller, we included all articles that met the headline criteria. This approach allowed for the inclusion of data from countries with less published material on the subject and resulted in a dataset of 948 articles, as shown in Table 2. By setting a fixed number of articles from the most represented countries, the data became more evenly distributed, allowing for a broader view of AI reporting across the continent.

Table 2. Number of stories sampled per country.

Country	Number of results after the first round of cleaning	Number of articles considered for analysis	Percentage of URLs considered for analysis from the cleaned dataset
Botswana	4	4	100
Burkina Faso	3	3	100
Cameroon	2	2	100
Chad	4	4	100
Egypt	19	19	100
Ethiopia	21	21	100
Ghana	893	89	10
Kenya	598	80	13
Liberia	4	4	100
Libya	116	85	73
Malawi	11	11	100
Mali	71	71	100
Mauritius	6	6	100
Morocco	10	10	100
Namibia	20	20	100
Nigeria	2749	100	4
Rwanda	10	10	100
Sierra Leone	3	3	100
Somalia	11	11	100
South Africa	2849	100	4
South Sudan	4	4	100
Sudan	38	38	100
Tanzania	68	68	100
Uganda	146	146	100
Zambia	37	37	100
Niger	2	2	100
Total	7699	948	12.31329

After obtaining the URLs, we used the Data Tools in Excel to remove duplicates. We identified 224 articles with non-functioning links or inaccessible text, resulting in a final sample of 724 articles for analysis.

Data Analysis

Content analysis formed the basis of our data analysis. Initially, we performed a descriptive analysis of article metadata. This included identifying the publication section and individual authors and categorising authors based on their affiliations or roles. Word frequency analysis was then performed using WordSmith Tools to identify prominent terms and buzzwords within the articles. The final analysis was a qualitative content analysis drawing on the Burkean notion of identification. A coding framework was developed and refined through an iterative process to ensure consistency in the qualitative analysis. Inter-coder reliability was established by having three research team members independently code a subset of articles and then convene to discuss, with discrepancies being resolved through discussion and refinement of the coding framework.

Operationalising Identification in the Analysis

Our analysis is grounded in Kenneth Burke's theory of identification, a concept within his broader framework of language as symbolic action. Burke posits that humans, as symbol-using beings, use language to interpret and interact with their environment (Burke 1966: 15). Identification, as a rhetorical tool, suggests that persuasion occurs when an audience perceives a shared understanding or 'co-substantiality' with the speaker (Burke 1969: 55). Hansen (1996: 52) further delineates this into three processes: naming, negotiating identity, and achieving co-substantiality. In AI news reporting, identification allows us to examine how linguistic choices contribute to the 'misrepresentation and over-inflation of AI capabilities' (Placani 2023: 691), often called AI hype.

Scholars have categorised several discourses frequently employed to create a sense of shared understanding or urgency, feeding into AI hype. These include anthropomorphism, which speaks of AI in human characteristics with the goal of increased relatability. Markelius et al. (2024: 730) note that anthropomorphic discourse tends to be shared among "users, technologies, designers, innovators and regulators alike, with significant epistemological and ethical consequences." Another kind of discourse is the "fear of missing out" discourse, where language is used to convey a sense of urgency in keeping abreast with developments or being the first and most significant, as evidenced in the discourse around the US–China AI race (Cai and Zhang 2023). The focus tends to be on the discourse of role players in the space, such as users, creators and regulators, with minimal consideration of the discourse of information mediators, including news media.

We operationalised identification in four ways to apply Burke's framework to our analysis. First, we analysed the placement of AI articles within different sections of news publications (e.g., technology, business, politics) to understand how framing

varied across focus areas (Bader 1990; Wu and Kornprobst 2019). This allowed us to identify how authors create identification with the assumed reader of that section. Second, we categorised authors (e.g., African journalists, Western journalists, and researchers) to assess how their backgrounds influenced the narratives and perspectives presented (Nkoala, 2022). Third, we analysed word frequency to uncover buzzwords and linguistic patterns contributing to AI hype (Baayen 2001; Placani 2023). Finally, we examined how language is used to create a sense of shared identity between authors and audiences, focusing on how articles appeal to specific values, beliefs, or fears to shape attitudes towards AI (Burke 1969: 55). This operationalisation allowed us to systematically analyse how news media uses language to construct and disseminate AI narratives, contributing to a broader understanding of AI hype.

Findings

Sections of the Publications Our Sampled Data Was Published

Figure 1 provides an overview of the sections of the publications in which our sampled data was published.

The analysis shown in Figure 1 reveals that the majority of articles on AI (36%) are published in the technology section, followed by news (24%) and business (19%). This suggests a strong focus on AI's technical aspects and economic implications in African news media. It aligns with Brokensha's (2020) study, which found that the most popular topic in its dataset of South African news reports on AI was 'Business, finance, and the economy'. The relatively lower representation of articles in opinion (6%), internet news (5%), and science (5%) sections indicates a potential need for

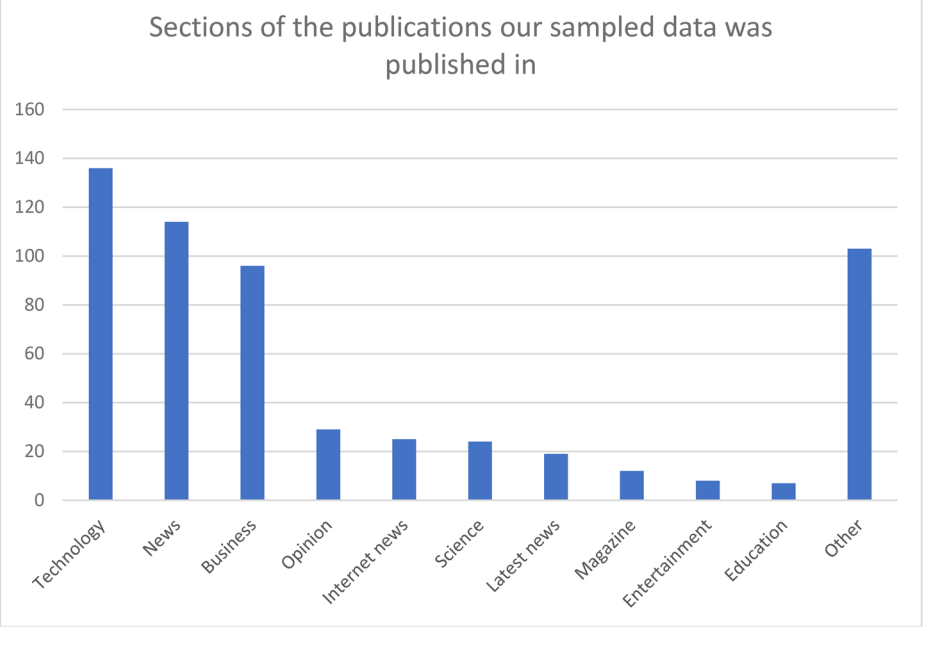

Figure 1. Sections of the publications our sampled data was published.

more in-depth analysis, critical perspectives, and scientific discourse on AI. The presence of articles in sections like entertainment (2%) and education (1%) suggests that AI is being recognised as a topic with broader societal relevance and implications, extending beyond technology and business. However, the limited number of articles in these sections indicates a need to further explore AI's impact on various aspects of African life. The "Other" category, which encompasses a variety of sections including lifestyle, government, trending and sports, accounts for 21% of the articles.

Number of Articles by Individual Authors/Entities

Figure 2 gives an overview of the number of articles by individual authors and entities.

AFP, a global news agency with a significant presence in Africa, leads with 15% of the articles. Their coverage of AI in the articles considered included issues of technological advancements and stories on ethical concerns (Palmer 2019). Examples of headlines of articles bylined by AFP include "Musk's AI letter is a 'hot mess' of hype, say critics" (Yen—Ghana, 30 March 2023) and "AI robots at UN reckon they could run the world better" (Eye Radio—South Sudan, 8 July 2023). Other international outlets, including Reuters (6%), BBC (2%), and CNN (1%) were dwarfed by this. Research Snipers, which describes itself as a provider of "breaking news related to technology, phones, gadgets, tech companies", contributes 13% of the articles. An example of its published article was headlined "The Role of AI and Machine Learning in Real Estate Market Analysis" (Tripoli Post—Libya, 12 June 2023). These non-African outlets' global reach and reputation lend authority to their coverage, but their focus on AI may be less African-centric than local news outlets (Silverberg 2024).

Several press releases from private companies and organisations accounted for 9% of the articles analysed. These focused on announcing new AI products, services, or initiatives. While they provide valuable information about the latest developments,

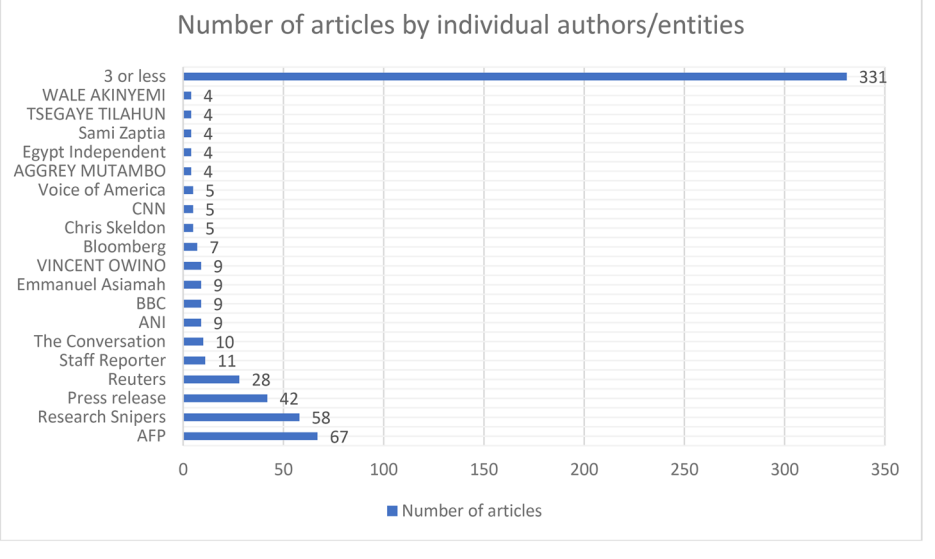

Figure 2. Number of articles by individual authors/entities.

they are inherently promotional and do not offer a balanced view of AI's potential risks and challenges (Panda, Upadhyay, and Khandelwal 2019). The remaining articles are dispersed among a long tail of individual authors and entities, with most contributing only a few articles each.

Number of Articles by Category of Authors/Entities

Figure 3 is a graphical representation of the number of articles by category of authors and entities.

In the sampled dataset, African journalists, news entities and content creators contributed nearly a third (29%) of the articles analysed. This suggests a strong local interest in AI and a growing awareness of its implications within African societies. However, the significant presence of Western-based news entities (21%) and journalists (5%) indicates a considerable influence of Western perspectives in shaping the narrative around AI in Africa in online news reports, raising questions about the potential for Western-centric biases to overshadow or marginalise African viewpoints and concerns. Asian-based news entities (12%) add another dimension to this narrative, highlighting the growing global interest in AI's potential impact on the continent. Notable was the small proportion of articles authored by researchers (4%) and African-based news entities (4%). This suggests that the voices of those directly engaged in AI research and development in Africa, which we argue are essential for a nuanced and locally informed understanding of the technology's potential and challenges, are muted. The "Various" category, comprising 9% of articles, includes

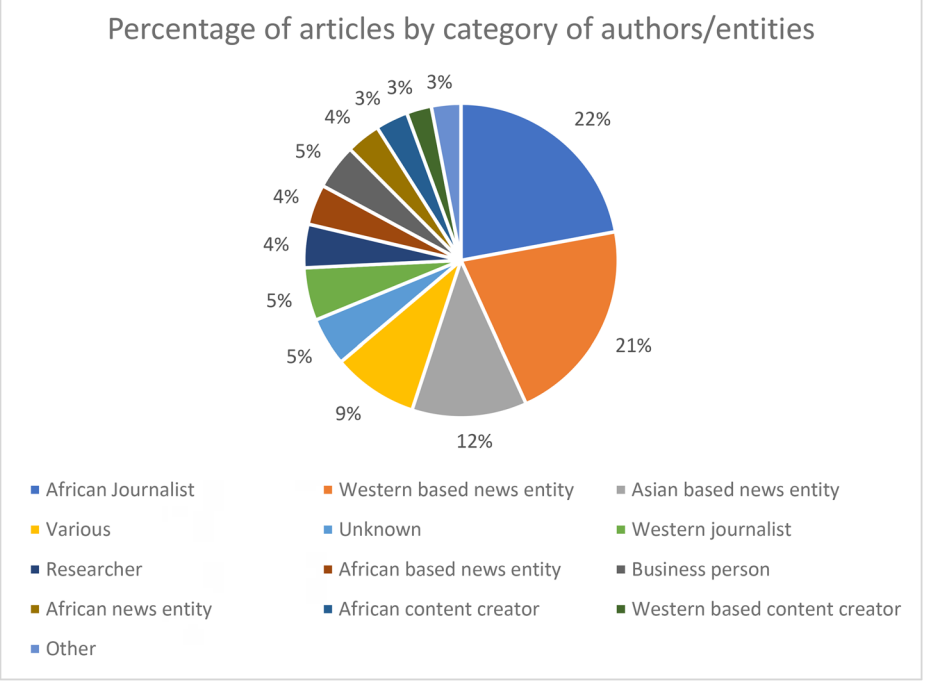

Figure 3. Number of articles by category of authors/entities.

political voices, legal practitioners, fact-checkers, and even someone affiliated with the United Nations.

Word Frequency Analysis

Figure 4 is a graphical representation of the word frequency analysis, showing the top 60 words featured in the articles, excluding stop words such as "the," "at," etc. The word frequency analysis provides an overview of the buzzwords used and highlights several key themes and potential biases in the discourse surrounding AI in African news media.

The prominence of words like "technology," "data," "new," and "development" demonstrates the dominant focus on the technical aspects and potential benefits of AI, typical of AI hype. The prominence of "company" and "business" highlights the economic focus of AI coverage, another trait that characterises AI hype even outside of news media coverage. "Google," "Microsoft," and "ChatGPT" were mentioned frequently, reflecting a replication of the dominance of Western tech giants in the AI landscape and reinforcing a Western-centric focus. While word frequency analysis provides useful insights into common terms and thematic patterns in AI reportage, we acknowledge that it does not capture the full contextual or rhetorical nuances of language use. Words such as 'innovation' or 'progress' can have multiple connotations, affirmative or critical, depending on their framing within the articles. The close reading undertaken by the researchers provides a more nuanced interpretation of these terms,

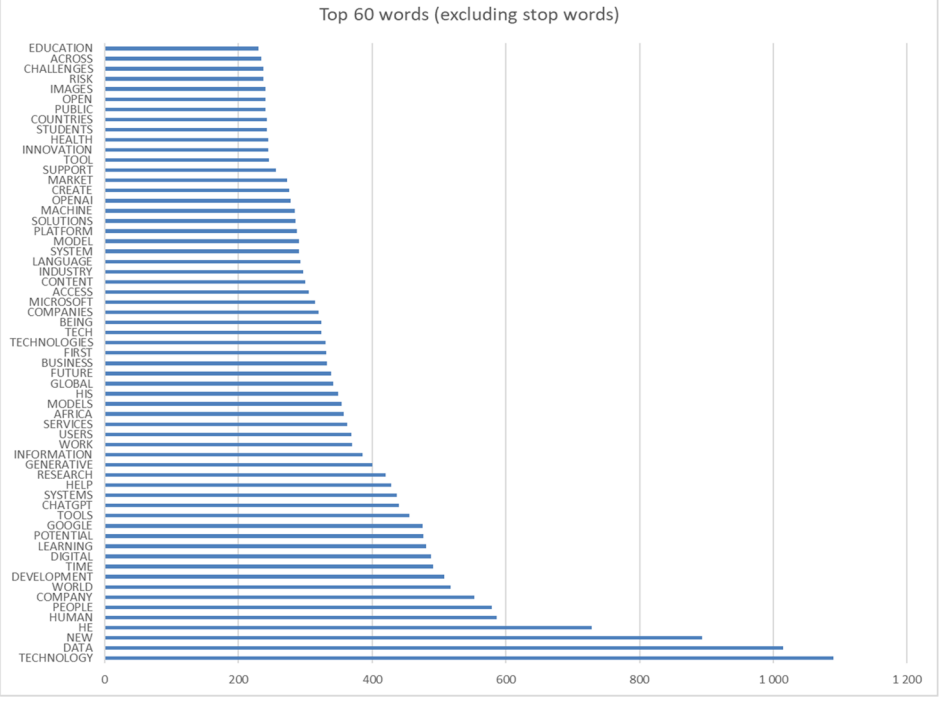

Figure 4. Word frequency graph of the 60 most frequently used words in the articles (excluding stop words).

given the contexts in the articles where they appeared. Given the study's broad scope and dataset size, we aimed to map general patterns of AI discourse in African news media. Future studies could build on these quantitative findings by incorporating discourse analysis to distinguish between hype-driven narratives and critical reporting on AI in African contexts more thoroughly.

Discussion

Drawing on the Burkean notion of language as symbolic action, we argue that placing AI articles across different sections of African news publications, as per our findings, is not merely a matter of categorisation but a form of symbolic action that reflects and reinforces particular values and perspectives. The dominance of the technology section suggests that AI is primarily framed as a technological artefact, emphasising its novelty, complexity, and potential for disruption, typical of the traits of AI hype (Leaver and Srdarov 2023). This discourse is intended to evoke a sense of awe and wonder that fuels the hype, but it may also obscure AI's social, ethical, and political dimensions. The news and business sections further reinforce this techno-centric perspective, focusing on AI's practical applications and economic implications. This view has been theorised by Alzouma (2005:340), who, writing on the utopianism of technology in Africa, argued that "Since the end of colonialism, nearly every decade has been marked by the celebration of a new technology as a means for overcoming the long-lasting problems faced by developing countries." By hyping AI's technical capabilities and economic potential, news outlets may inadvertently overshadow its broader societal implications, including its impact on employment, inequality, and cultural values (Markelius et al. 2024). This focus aligns with the interests of tech companies and investors, who benefit from the AI hype that promotes these tools as drivers of innovation and growth.

Regarding the choice of authors and entities, AFP and Research Snipers dominate the reportage, amplifying their voices and reinforcing their authority and AI expertise. The high number of press releases indicates that AI discourse is significantly shaped by organisations developing and deploying these technologies. This promotional tone links to the speculative tone characteristic of AI hype (Floridi 2024; Markelius et al. 2024), advanced by media and "the input and incentives of a diverse array of entities, including scientists, funding agencies, business interests, and the public itself" (Caulfield and Condit 2012: 210). Press releases, often promotional, may not adequately address AI's potential risks (Catenaccio 2022), creating a distorted picture that leads to unrealistic expectations and potentially harmful policy decisions (Simon 2024).

The data on the number of articles by category of authors/entities reveal a complex and potentially imbalanced conversation on AI in African online news media. While local journalists feature prominently, the strong presence of Western perspectives and the underrepresentation of researchers and regional stakeholders raise concerns about the diversity and inclusivity of the reports. This imbalance could limit the understanding of AI's implications for African societies, as the voices of those closest to its development and implementation within the African context may be drowned out by dominant narratives from elsewhere (Ade-Ibijola and Okonkwo 2023). Furthermore,

the symbolic framing of AI as an economic and technical imperative within African news media has tangible implications beyond discourse. It influences how AI is perceived by policymakers and investors, often fuelling optimistic narratives about AI's transformative potential while sidelining cautionary perspectives (Mohammed et al. 2024). This framing can steer policy decisions towards short-term technological adoption or investment in AI pilot projects without adequate local consultation or ethical oversight, echoing what Ade-Ibijola and Okonkwo (2023) describe as "emerging challenges" of AI in Africa. For instance, the repeated framing of AI as a 'solution' and 'tool' can create a sense of urgency among governments to adopt AI rapidly, reinforcing policy discourses that mirror global hype rather than rooted, community-specific needs (Kothari and Cruikshank 2022). It also shapes how funding bodies and international partners approach African AI initiatives, prioritising projects that align with these hyped narratives over those grounded in local contexts. Finally, this emphasis can shape public expectations, creating a climate where critical engagement with AI's social and cultural implications is overshadowed by a narrow focus on economic opportunity and technological progress. These real-world impacts underscore the need to see AI hype in African news not only as discursive exaggeration but as a force that can shape policy priorities, direct funding streams, and define the terms of public debate. In this sense, media hype is not just rhetorical but infrastructural, embedding itself in the decision-making logics of governments and investors alike (Gritsenko 2024; Neumark 2024).

The dominance of Western-based news entities and journalists in the authorship of AI-related articles can be seen as a symbolic action that reinforces the hegemonic position of Western perspectives in the global AI discourse (Roberge, Senneville, and Morin 2020; Ricaurte 2022). Conversely, the significant contribution of African journalists can be interpreted as a form of counter-hegemonic symbolic action. African journalists assert their agency and challenge Western narratives' dominance by actively participating in the discourse. However, the fact that Western voices still outnumber them suggests that this counter-hegemonic action is not fully realised.

Turning our attention to the findings related to the word frequency analysis and the buzzwords that emerge, from a Burkean perspective, the emphasis on words that allude to the novelty and progress associated with AI is quintessential AI hype aimed at fostering a sense of excitement and urgency around AI adoption, aligning with the interests of powerful tech industry actors who benefit from widespread AI implementation (Brokensha 2020; Dežman 2024). However, this focus on the positive aspects of AI may also filter out or downplay potential risks and challenges. The prominence of buzzwords like "tools" and "solutions" emphasises AI's practical applications and problem-solving capabilities (Ogola 2023), aligning with the broader global trend of viewing AI as a means to an end, a tool to enhance efficiency, productivity, and innovation (Brynjolfsson, Rock, and Syverson 2019). However, this utilitarian lens often overlooks the broader societal implications of AI, such as its impact on employment, inequality, and cultural values (Bassey 2019). The frequent use of "ChatGPT" and "generative" signals a growing interest in the creative and communicative potential of AI (Silverberg 2024). This fascination with AI's ability to generate text, images, and other forms of content is another way the news discourse highlights these technologies' perceived novelty and transformative power. However, this focus also raises

concerns about the potential for misinformation, manipulation, and the erosion of trust in information sources (Kreps, McCain, and Brundage 2022).

An interesting finding relates to the buzzwords about issues of gender and the specific mention of terms that identify the reportage as Afrocentric. The literature on AI hype and the words and phrases characterising it tend to focus on novelty, disruption and economic issues. We noted the frequent use of "he" and "his" in the reportage, to the extent that this emerged as a top word compared to an absence of any feminine pronouns in the top words. This indicates a bias towards male perspectives and voices, potentially marginalising the contributions and concerns of women in the field (Doneys et al. 2022). O'Connor and Liu (2024:1) note that technology is structurally and socially constructed; hence, "it mirrors the implicit biases of its creators, while also gaining new meanings and functions and potentially biases through repeated and widespread use." It is not surprising that in Africa, reference to AI has followed patriarchal structuring and, in most of the sampled cases, privileging male voices. Further, the limited presence of terms like "Africa," "African," and "African countries" in the reports raises concerns about the contextualisation and localisation of the narrative. The scarcity of these terms suggests that the coverage may not be adequately tailored to the specific needs, challenges, and opportunities African societies face (Brokensha 2020). While AI is a global phenomenon, its implications and applications vary significantly across regions and contexts (Brantner and Saurwein 2021). The limited presence of a 'uniquely African' story further perpetuates the inequalities already dominant, in part as a result of the colonial legacy. By focusing on global trends and perspectives, the coverage may inadvertently perpetuate the notion that AI is primarily a Western-driven phenomenon, overlooking Africa's vibrant and growing AI ecosystem (Brokensha 2020). From a Burkean perspective, these can be seen as a form of symbolic exclusion, where African societies' specific needs, challenges, and opportunities are marginalised in the global discourse on AI. Symbolic exclusion, as per Burke's theory, occurs when certain groups are marginalised through language and representation. The limited use of Afrocentric terms in our dataset, as shown in Figure 4, echoes colonial practices where indigenous perspectives were historically disregarded. This perpetuates the idea that AI is a Western construct, ignoring the continent's growing ecosystem.

Regarding the qualitative analysis of identification, the discourse reflects a mix of optimism, caution, and pragmatism. Characterising the discourse into these three orientations is a novel approach to studying how discursive interlocutors, such as the media, use language regarding AI. Current scholarship seems to focus on other aspects, such as how anthropomorphism and AI hype are fuelled by giving these tools human-like qualities (Placani 2024), the frequent use of metaphors and cultural narratives that draw parallels with myth, religion, and fiction when referring to AI (Giuliano 2020), and the novelty of the technology.

In terms of the optimistic discourse, by highlighting the transformative potential of AI, particularly its ability to address pressing issues facing the continent, the discourse aims to establish a strong sense of shared purpose and collective aspiration. The emphasis on AI's potential to "revolutionise systems" (The Midweek Sun, Botswana, 28 April 2023), streamline administrative tasks (Egypt Independent Main, Egypt, 23 April 2023) and optimise decision-making processes (Tech News, Libya, 17 June 2023) evokes a shared desire for efficiency and progress. By identifying AI with

"revolutionising agriculture," the discourse taps into a common frustration with outdated systems and inefficient processes in some of Africa's core sectors, creating a shared purpose in embracing AI as a solution.

Furthermore, the focus on AI's potential to transform small businesses (The Guardian Nigeria Newspaper, Nigeria, 10 June 2023) and leverage B2B marketing (Terminus Connected TV and Audio Advertising Overview, Burkino Faso, 5 September 2023), the publications speak to the aspirations of economic growth and prosperity fostering a sense of shared interest in leveraging technology for economic advancement. The emphasis on AI's potential to improve healthcare (IT News Africa—South Africa, 29 June 2023; The East African—Uganda, 23 December 2023), with applications ranging from diagnostics and treatment to drug discovery and development, appeals to a universal desire for better health outcomes and well-being creates a sense of shared hope and optimism for a healthier future. The shared values advanced in this kind of discourse create a powerful narrative encouraging stakeholders to embrace AI as a tool for progress and transformation in Africa, typical of AI hype.

However, the discourse is not one of unbridled optimism. Numerous articles express deep concerns about the potential negative impacts of AI. This negative orientation seeks to create a shared apprehension and vigilance towards the potential negative impacts and generates hype based on the disruption AI tools are set to bring. The language used to express these concerns, such as "disrupt" (Nile Pose—Uganda, 12 October 2023), "job losses" (The East African—Tanzania, 1 November 2023), and "bloodbath" (News South Africa—South Africa, 7 July 2023) evokes a shared fear of economic instability and displacement. By identifying AI with the potential for widespread unemployment and disruption of traditional industries, the discourse taps into deep-seated anxieties about the future of work and livelihoods, fuelling hype based on creating a sense of shared vulnerability and a shared interest in mitigating the potential negative consequences of AI on jobs. The concerns extend to the creative industries, where AI-generated content like deepfakes (Addis Insight—Ethiopia, 16 May 2023) and music imitations (Egypt Independent—Egypt, 27 May 2023) are seen as threats to artists' livelihoods and revenue stream discourse that appeals to a shared appreciation for human creativity and concern for the well-being of artists and creators, as well as the fear of AI taking over the essence of what makes us human—our creativity. This mirrors the ways hype is created by focusing on novelty, as discussed previously. However, in this case, the novelty is not based on something new and transformative, but rather on something unknown and disruptive.

Moreover, the ethical implications of AI are also a significant point of contention. Potential misuse in spreading misinformation (Ghana News Online—Ghana, 11 February 2023), manipulating media, and facilitating harmful activities like sextortion rackets (Yen—Ghana, 23 July 2023) evoke shared moral outrage and a desire to protect individuals and communities. Identifying AI with these adverse outcomes encourages a critical, cautious approach to its development and deployment. Coverage also warns about AI's "growing dangers" (Zambia24—Zambia, 2 May 2023) and its potential to be "quite scary" (Nile Post—Uganda, 2 May 2023). However, this negative framing is often dwarfed by optimistic discourse, suggesting that while concerns about AI's negative impacts exist, the dominant narrative still prioritises its potential benefits and transformative possibilities. The pessimistic AI discourses, highlighting job losses,

ethical concerns, and potential misuse, could lead to overly cautious African policy-making, potentially stifling innovation and delaying the adoption of beneficial AI technologies (Ade-Ibijola and Okonkwo 2023). This negative framing may also foster public fear and distrust, hindering acceptance and integration of AI solutions into critical sectors (Brokensha, Kotzé, and Senekal 2023). Consequently, this could widen the digital divide and limit Africa's ability to leverage AI for socioeconomic development.

Lastly, a pragmatic discourse on AI within the African online news landscape warrants consideration and appears to have received minimal consideration from existing studies on this issue. This discourse goes beyond the simple binary of optimism and pessimism, acknowledging the potential of AI while simultaneously recognising its inherent risks. While providing informational updates on AI developments (Alwihda Info—Chad, 24 July 2023), these neutral articles also contribute to the hype on AI. The informational and explanatory nature of these articles also plays a crucial role in their identification (KahawaTungu—Kenya, 27 July 2023). Their approach to AI hype is in how they position themselves to demystify the tools and make developments surrounding it accessible to a broader audience, *via* explainers and informational content. The content of these articles aims to empower readers to participate in the ongoing conversations about AI's societal role and drive interest in AI. By presenting its potential and limitations, these pragmatic discourses on AI enable African policymakers to craft nuanced regulations that encourage innovation while mitigating risks.

Below is a tabulated reading of the findings discussed above to describe the reportage in Table 3. This is then linked to the implications this has on how we understand bias in light of AI hype in online news reports on AI aimed at African audiences. The tabulated framework we developed provides a structured approach to analysing news reportage on AI. The framework enables a comprehensive assessment of how AI is portrayed in the media by examining key elements such as author/

Table 3. Key elements for examining AI hype and bias in African news.

Framework element	Description	Implications for understanding AI bias in African news in light of AI hype
Sections of publication	The categorisation of articles into different sections (Technology, News, Business, etc.) reflects AI's perceived relevance and framing concerning various aspects of society.	Overrepresentation in the Technology and Business sections is characteristic of AI hype that prioritises technical and economic aspects, potentially marginalising social and ethical considerations.
Individual authors/ entities	The frequency and prominence of specific authors and entities (e.g., AFP, Research Snipers) reveal the key actors shaping the AI narrative in online news publications in Africa.	The dominance of Western-based entities reinforces Western-centric discourse and the communicative approach they use to drive AI hype.
Categories of authors/ entities	The distribution of articles across different categories (journalists, researchers, corporations, etc.) reflects the discourse's diversity of voices and perspectives.	The underrepresentation of researchers and local entities may limit the diversity of perspectives and reinforce existing power imbalances, suggesting a missed opportunity to foreground local discourse.
Word frequency analysis	The frequency and co-occurrence of words reveal the dominant themes, metaphors, and associations that shape the AI discourse, providing insights into the underlying values, assumptions, and biases.	The emphasis on terms like "technology," "development," and "business" reflects a techno-centric and economically driven discourse linked to AI hype. In contrast, the relative absence of terms like "ethics" and "bias" indicates a lack of critical engagement with AI's social implications.

entity, terminology, and identification strategies. This table can guide future analyses of media narratives on AI, beyond the African context.

Conclusion

Our analysis reveals a clear bias in how AI is portrayed in the media, mirroring the decades-long discourse on AI hype and longstanding colonial legacies, where technological developments are framed as either progressive or exploitative without acknowledging the agency of indigenous communities. The dominance of Western authors and a focus on technical and economic aspects, combined with an emphasis on "tools" and "solutions," could be one reason for this, as it suggests that these are not primarily African voices that are shaping the discourse, but rather Western perspectives that are carried in African platforms. This framing marginalises local voices and concerns and perpetuates colonial narratives of technological progress in Africa. The strategic use of identification further reinforces these biases. By aligning readers with dominant perspectives and buzzwords, the media obscures alternative viewpoints and potentially creates new biases. These biases also resonate with data colonialism, where Western technological discourses and platforms appropriate local contexts while reinforcing external power structures (Couldry and Mejias 2019). By framing AI as an external solution to African problems, African media coverage can inadvertently contribute to these dynamics, limiting locally driven narratives of technology's role and potential.

In addition to the symbolic role of language in news discourse, the visibility and amplification of AI narratives are also influenced by algorithmic infrastructures. Algorithmic Gatekeeping Theory (Tufekci 2015) highlights how algorithmic systems in platforms curate and prioritise content, reinforcing certain discourses while marginalising others. Similarly, Platform Power Theory (Helmond 2015) underscores how platforms themselves shape what audiences see by privileging specific narratives and types of content. These theories help explain why AI-related news content, particularly articles from Western wire services and business-focused pieces, dominate African news feeds and public discourse. The algorithmic promotion of these narratives further entrenches techno-solutionist perspectives and Western-centric frames, making it even harder for critical, localised reporting to gain traction.

To mitigate Western-centric biases in African AI discourse, promoting local journalism and diverse authorship is crucial. This can be achieved by supporting initiatives that empower African journalists and researchers to report on and analyse AI, ensuring their perspectives are central to the narrative. Additionally, encouraging collaborations between African and international stakeholders can facilitate knowledge exchange and contribute to a more balanced and inclusive discourse on AI in Africa. To address these challenges and foster more responsible AI journalism, African media outlets can play a proactive role in shifting these narratives. One step is to expand the range of voices featured in news coverage, including local researchers, policymakers, and communities who experience the impacts of AI firsthand. Another is to balance coverage of AI's economic potential with sustained attention to its social, cultural, and ethical implications. Journalism training and professional development could also prioritise critical AI literacy, equipping journalists to ask deeper questions about the technologies they report on.

The table and framework we developed serve as tools for researchers interested in a more holistic analysis of the portrayal of AI in news reportage across the global South. Using a structured approach to analysing news articles, the table shows how one can comprehensively examine various elements and move away from associating AI hype with 'optimistic' discourse, recognising that pragmatic and pessimistic discourse in news media may be a key part of how the hype is fuelled. It also shows that consideration of AI hype in news media should extend beyond just considering the words used in the reportage. However, these are central and bear in mind the other aspects of reportage that confer meaning on the articles, including who the authors are and the sections in which they occur.

Future research should tease out the country-specific manifestations of bias. It could consider a comparative analysis between articles authored by African journalists and news entities and those written by those based in the global North. Another comparative dimension that could be analysed by subsequent research is the difference between news articles, analysis, and opinion. Still, another more comprehensive study could include an analysis of Lusophone, Francophone, or Arabic-speaking Africa and news reportage in Indigenous African languages to tease out the linguistic nuances further. Future studies could also build on this work by connecting our rhetorical framework to contemporary debates in algorithmic journalism, digital colonialism, and critical AI studies, offering a more comprehensive understanding of how AI discourse intersects with structural power and technological governance.

Ultimately, our findings underscore that while AI hype is driven by language, its impacts are felt in the structures of policy, investment, and public imagination. By amplifying African voices, centring local contexts, and prioritising nuanced and critical reporting, African media can resist one-dimensional hype and instead foster a more inclusive and socially responsible discourse around AI.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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