

The Politicization of AI

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Despite AI's consequences and meteoric rise in popularity over the past few years, the US has only recently [taken a step towards AI regulation](#). Newspapers play an important role in forming public opinions on AI and, in turn, on how politicians create AI legislation. Given party dynamics and the polarized political landscape in the US, understanding how left-leaning and right-leaning media outlets depict AI can help predict the potential politicization of AI. Also, because politics and values vary across borders, analyzing newspapers from different countries will confirm if these results are unique to the US or could be more generalizable, thereby better solidifying the emerging presence of politicization of Artificial Intelligence.

Because politicized issues tend to be moralized, we decided to investigate the ways in which national newspapers talked about ethics in articles relating to AI. To do so, we collected every article from 2000 through June 2023 that mentioned “artificial intelligence”, “AI” or “A.I.” from eight national-audience US and UK newspapers: The New York Times, The Washington Post, USA Today, The Wall Street Journal, The Guardian, The Observer, The Daily Telegraph and The Sunday Telegraph. To understand the way ethics were discussed in these articles, we considered the ones mentioning themes such as morality, equality, transparency and fairness, which we grouped under the name “ethics”.

Ethics in AI news

We found that ethics is often discussed in two ways. First, ethical mentions occur when discussing a company division or position, such as forming or disbanding AI ethics committees. A [2022 New York Times article](#) describes how in 2020, a prominent technology company “blocked its top ethical A.I. researchers” from warning that new AI systems “could spew abusive or discriminatory language.” Articles also mention ethics in a more traditional sense by explaining AI's implications on society. For instance, an [article published in 2019 by USA Today](#) discusses the controversial use of AI in police body cameras to determine the chance of a person to commit a crime: “AI is used in predictive analysis, in which a computer reveals how likely a person is to commit a crime...the technique has faced scrutiny over whether it improves safety or simply perpetuates inequities.”

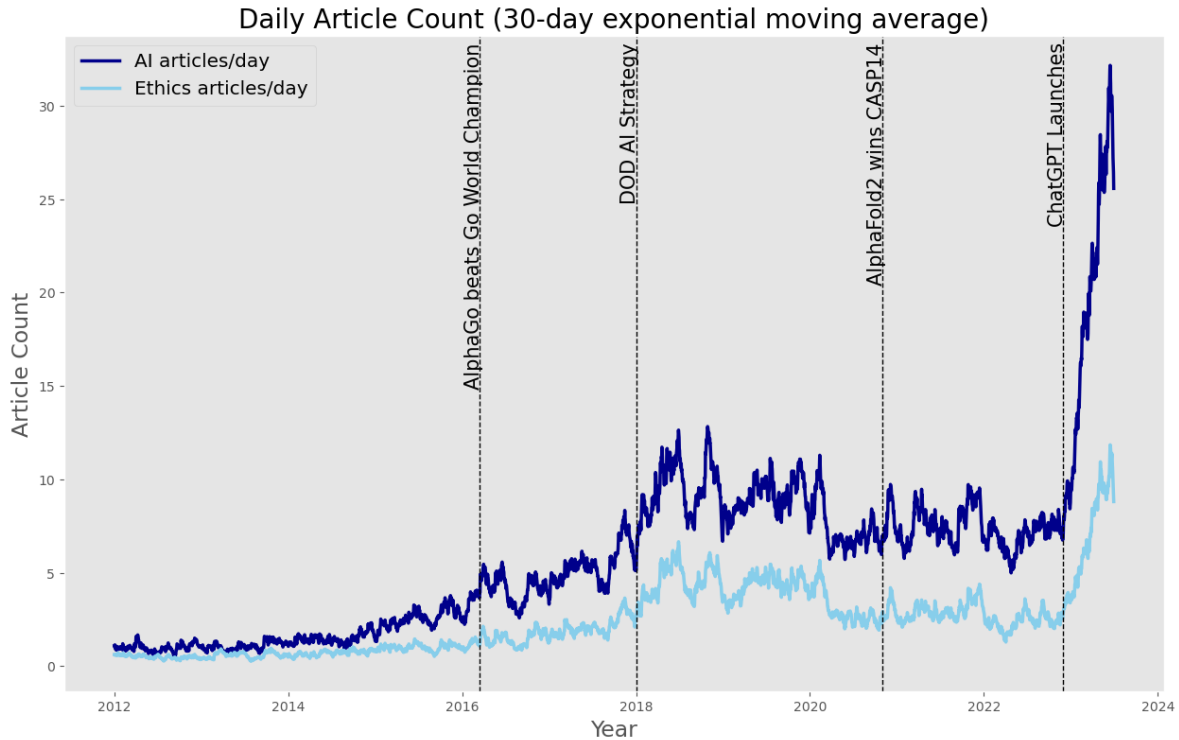


Figure 1. AI Articles and Ethics-Related AI Articles Published per Day

The pattern of publishing ethics-related articles mirrors that of total AI articles published, making up a significant portion of AI content (Figure 1). The heavy ethical AI coverage highlights its unknown and potentially harmful societal impacts. However, when OpenAI introduced [ChatGPT](#) at the end of 2022, articles mentioning AI and ethics became a smaller proportion of total AI articles. Does the relative decrease in coverage of AI's ethical implications suggest all media outlets are less concerned with AI's potential harmful consequences? To answer this question, we divided the number of articles mentioning ethics into left- and right-leaning categories by country.

Left-Right Difference by Country

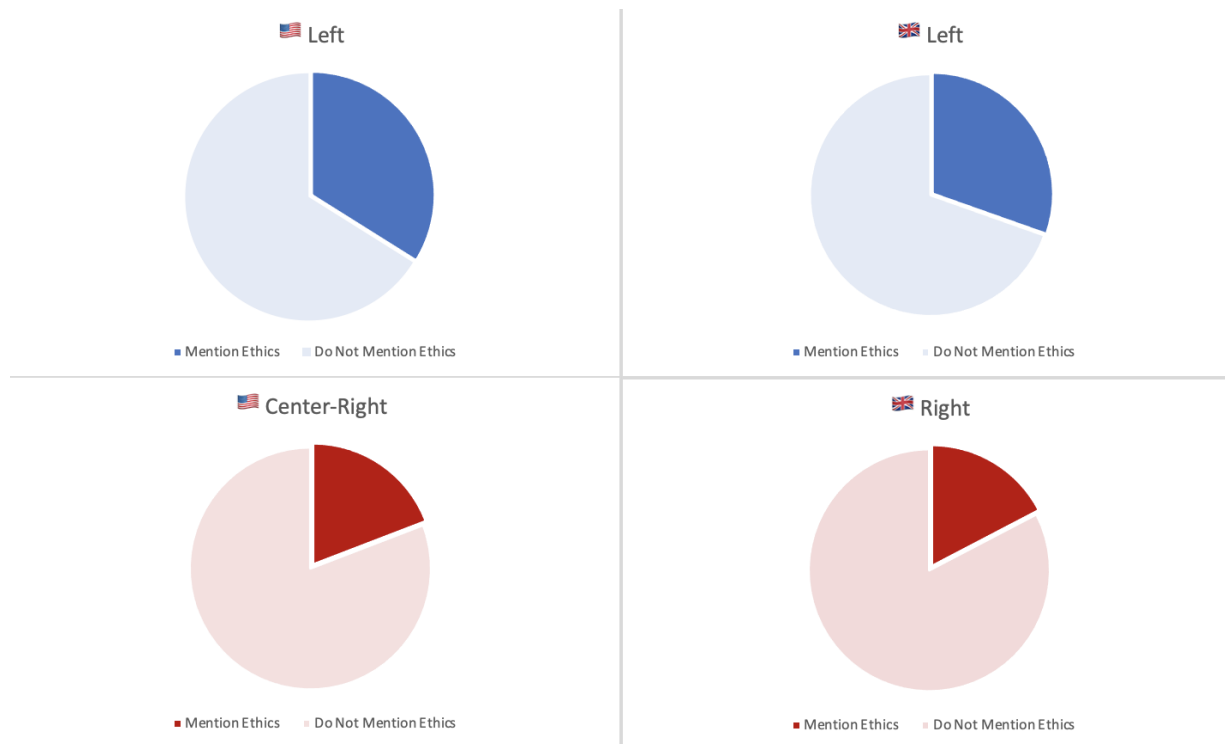


Figure 2. Relative Amount of Articles Mentioning Ethics by Political-Lean and Country

When looking at political leaning, we see noticeable differences in coverage on ethics between left- and center/right-leaning media outlets: left-leaning journals publish AI ethics-related articles more frequently than center/right-leaning journals. We found no notable difference in reporting between the US and UK. These findings reveal an emerging politicization, wherein left-leaning media more prominently discusses ethics. To further understand this difference, we created WordClouds depicting the words most frequently used in articles about ethics in left- and center/right-leaning newspapers (Figure 3).



Figure 3A. Left-Leaning Newspapers' WordCloud when Mentioning Ethics



Figure 3B. Center/Right-Leaning Newspapers' WordCloud when Mentioning Ethics

Figure 3. WordClouds of Ethical Articles Separated by Newspapers' Political-Leaning

In left-leaning newspapers, the largest word was department, but among the set of the next-biggest words are "women", "privacy", "criminal", and "abuse." Smaller words were "racial" and "gender." None of those words are present (except privacy) in the right-leaning papers. These differences further suggest a politicization of AI, in which the left focuses more on AI's social implications.

Conclusion

News media plays an instrumental role in the process of politicization, acting as an intermediary between the general public and politicians. If AI becomes a politically contentious issue, it may inhibit bipartisan decision-making, increase filibusters, and lead to a slow adoption of regulations in a domain that is already growing at rates with which the government can't manage. Given this context, the media emerges as a pivotal force in shaping public perception and political discourse, accentuating the need for a well-informed understanding of AI. Examining how AI is discussed in politicized papers gives us a sneak peek into how the legislative landscape and future adoption of AI could look.

Methodology

We examined 29,129 articles containing the words "artificial intelligence" and "AI" and "A.I." in The New York Times, The Washington Post, USA Today, The Wall Street Journal, The Guardian, The Observer, The Daily Telegraph and The Sunday Telegraph, published between January 1, 2001 and June 1, 2023. AI Articles were tagged as an ethics-related article if the article contained one of the designated root words—which were moral*, ethic*, equalit*, and transparen*—or contained one of the designated words—which were fairness, justice, rights, accountability and integrity. The WordClouds created had different window sizes since left-leaning newspapers published about 4 times more articles than right-leaning newspapers. WordCloud window sizes: left-leaning window size was [4,1] and non-left leaning was [15,5]. For additional information about our methods, see [here](#).