

COMPLEMENTING OR SUBSTITUTING: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF GLOBAL MEDIA NARRATIVES ON THE USE OF AI IN EDUCATION

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Abstract

Artificial intelligence (AI) is quickly changing the educational landscape, affecting the process of teaching, learning, and management. The media worldwide is a decisive factor that shapes how people perceive the role of AI, and it is usually depicted as a complementary factor to human educators or substitutive, and it may replace them (Luckin et al., 2016; Selwyn, 2019). The current study explores the ways global media discourse is building AI as an educational complement or substitute and discusses rhetorical and linguistic features employed to support or criticize AI integration. The qualitative research design adopted is based on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Appraisal Theory on a sample of 200 English-language news items published in the period 2020-2025 on North America, Europe, Asia, and Middle East. Results show that complementary policies focus more on improvement, alliance, and ethical gains, whereas substitutive policies are concerned with risk, teacher replacement, and ethical issues. Such discourses as hybrid, ambivalent are both common and indicate uncertainty in the population. In the education sector, global media plays an active role in mediating the knowledge of the population and credibility of AI, influencing the views on its possible positive and negative aspects.

INTRODUCTION

AI has become a revolutionary technology in the education sector and it affects the process of teaching, learning, and administration all over the world (Luckin et al., 2016; Holmes, Bialik, & Fadel, 2019). Intelligent tutoring systems, automated grading software, adaptive learning platforms, and chatbots are examples of AI-based tools that give a chance to optimize the educational process, personalize learning, and even assist teachers in engaging creatively with the students socio-emotionally (Selwyn, 2019; Williamson & Piattoeva, 2021). The role of media in presenting these technologies to the masses is vital in the way people perceive them, creating a narrative that legitimize the

inclusion of AI as complementary or positioning it as a threat to the jobs of many others (van Dijk, 2015; Fairclough, 2015). Examining the construction of AI in education by the media is vital to educators, policymakers, and technology developers. The concept of AI as a complementary technology can espouse trust, ethical usage, and pedagogical improvement, whereas the concept of AI as a threat, displacing teachers, or ethics can affect skepticism and opposition (Luckin et al., 2016; Selwyn, 2019). The cultural, political and economic differences in discourse are also influenced by regional differences in the perception and implementation of AI adoption in various educational systems (Hallin &

Mancini, 2012; Mohammed, 2025). Although AI is extensively discussed in the educational research, little systematic exploration is done regarding the way global media formulate AI as an addition or a replacement. The majority of the previous studies are concerned with pedagogical results or policy-making systems instead of the media discourse and rhetorical and linguistic practices (Luckin et al., 2016; Selwyn, 2019). This gap restricts the knowledge of the social and ethical stories that mediate social legitimacy and acceptance of AI in education. The study examines 200 news stories about the topic that were published during 2020-2025 by the North American, European, Asian, and Middle Eastern news outlets in English. The study targets the aspects of evaluative language, metaphors, modality, and intertextual references as applied to understanding the construction of AI complementarity or substitution in media. Although news media is the center of attention, the study does not exclude that other forms of communication like social media and policy reports could also influence people in their perception of AI in education.

1.1 Research Objectives:

- To identify the discursive ways through which the global media narratives construct the complementary or substituting role of AI in education.
- To explore the rhetorical or linguistic strategies employed by the global media narratives to either legitimize or challenge the integration of AI in education.

1.2 Research Questions:

1. In what discursive ways the global media narratives construct the complementary or substituting role of AI in education?
2. What rhetorical or linguistic strategies are employed by the global media narratives to either legitimize or challenge the integration of AI in education?

Literature Review

2.1 Media and AI in Education

The use of artificial intelligence (AI) is sweeping over the globe, changing the practice of teaching, learning, and administration (Luckin et al., 2016; Holmes et al., 2019). Artificial intelligence's tools, including intelligent tutoring systems, automated grading, adaptive learning platforms, and chatbots, are covered by the media with the framing of either supplementing or fully replacing human educators (Selwyn, 2019; Williamson, 2021). News reporting at a global level is instrumental in creating an impression of AI in society, which helps form societal expectations, ethical discussion, and policy-related choices (Bucchi & Trench, 2021; Taha, 2020). The scholars state that the media is not only descriptive but also constructive and creates the discourses of opportunity and risk based on the rhetorical, evaluative, and metaphorical tactics of justifying or refuting AI integration (van Dijk, 2015; Fairclough, 2015).

2.2 AI as a Supplement to Teachers

Other sources note that media present AI as complementary, focusing on the improvement, cooperation, and empowerment (Luckin et al., 2016; Holmes et al., 2019). The complementary narratives describe AI as a co-pilot or teaching assistant, which may help the teacher deliver a personalized instruction, assessment, and administrative work (Williamson & Piattoeva, 2021). Positive sociotechnical imaginaries are reflected in evaluative language in these discourses as optimistic, progress, and human agency (Jasanoff & Kim, 2015; Tutton, 2020). Analysis of such narratives based on appraisal shows that the use of affective and appreciation-focused lexis is common, highlighting the advantages of using this approach to educators and students alike, including the enhanced level of engagement, efficiency, and creativity (Martin & White, 2005; Holmes et al., 2019). The use of complementary framing is widespread in Western media, as AI is introduced as a means of pedagogic improvement and moral synthesis. This framing is justified by expert opinions, institutional approvals and case studies, which depict AI as a socially and educationally responsible innovation (Luckin et al., 2016; Bessen, 2019). These stories indicate that AI is a complementary and not a substitutionary technology to human teachers, which makes it

acceptable to believe in technological-based pedagogical solutions (Holmes et al., 2019; Selwyn, 2019).

2.3 AI as Substitutive and Risk-Oriented

On the other hand, media discourses portray AI as a substitute as well, implying the possible displacement of teachers, deskilling, and ethical issues (Selwyn, 2019; Williamson, 2021). Such lexical options as replace, automate, and depersonalize and metaphors like robot teacher or digital overseer have a threatening and uncertain tone (Luckin et al., 2016; Kinsella et al., 2020). Substitutive narratives anticipate the dangers of labour disruption, inequality, and bias in algorithms and embody the fear of the social and ethical effects of AI in education (Williamson & Piattoeva, 2021; Miles, 2022). These stories are especially noticeable in Asian and Middle Eastern media, where culture, politics, and education condition the general population to discuss automation (Jinying, 2018; Khatib, 2021). According to scholars, the idea of substitutive framing tends to coincide with the criticism of neoliberalism in educational reforms and efficiency-oriented policies, and it frames AI as a problematic phenomenon instead of a universally positive innovation (Selwyn, 2019; Harris et al., 2023).

2.4 Ambivalent and Hybrid Discourses

The media often include complementary and substitutive framings, which have ambivalence to AI (Williamson, 2021; Selwyn, 2019). Hybrid narratives recognize the potential of AI to become a more effective learning tool but warns against the over-trusting or the problem of ethics. Such texts use hedging, concessive clauses and modal forms to bargain between being optimistic and risky according to linguistic features (Martin & White, 2005; van Dijk, 2015). Such an ambivalence indicates the ambiguity of the society regarding the use of AI and its effects on the fields of pedagogy, work, and ethics (Holmes et al., 2019; Williamson and Piattoeva, 2021).

2.5 The Regional differences in Media Framing

Comparative analysis suggests that AI discourses are regionally diverse because of policy, cultural values, and media standards (Hallin & Mancini, 2012; Mohammed, 2025). The main trends supported by North American and European stories are complementary AI stories, which fit the theme of innovation, ethics, and teacher empowerment (Holmes et al., 2019; Luckin et al., 2016). There is a hybrid orientation in Asian media, where they appreciate efficiencies and the dangers of replacement, especially within education systems that are based on examinations (Jinying, 2018; Siddique, 2020). The Middle East media tends to preempt the substitutive discourse which includes the social, ethical, and workforce impacts of AI adoption (Abu-Fadil, 2019; Khatib, 2021).

Although, the integration of AI in education has been discussed in the scholarly academic literature, the majority of the existing studies dwell upon pedagogical outcomes, technological efficiency, or national policy instead of exploring the media discourse construction of complementarity versus substitution (Luckin et al., 2016; Selwyn, 2019). There is limited comparative study of media discourses across the world, especially through CDA and Appraisal Theory approaches of establishing rhetorical and linguistic strategies. The bridging of this gap can elucidate the mediation of media narratives on the question of how AI in education is perceived by the public, promotes legitimacy, and raises ethical concerns.

Research Methodology

This study follows a qualitative research design based on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in order to investigate how the media across the world shape discourses about artificial intelligence (AI) as either a complement or a substitute in the education sector. The ideological, institutional, and power-related aspects of the media discourse can be studied using CDA due to its capability to correlate linguistic systems with the wider socio-political contexts (Fairclough, 2015; van Dijk, 2015). The research incorporates the Appraisal Theory, a structured study on the evaluative language, stance, and interpersonal meaning that is used to support a fine-grained linguistic analysis (Martin & White, 2005). Such combined approach allows reading on the macro

level, ideologically, and micro-level linguistically, with reading.

3.1 Research Design

The research is based on a qualitative, interpretivist paradigm where the preference is given to meaning, context, and discourse rather than numeric measurement (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The study is aimed at examining how media texts generate specific realities of AI in education as opposed to measuring attitudes. CDA allows studying discursive strategies, pattern frames, intertextuality, and rhetorical options that influence the development of the general perception of AI technologies (Fairclough, 2015). The Appraisal Theory promotes a more profound analysis of attitude (affect, judgment, appreciation), engagement and graduation resources utilized to assess AI tools and educational practice (Martin & White, 2005; Kinsella et al., 2020). Collectively these structures are able to give depth to the methodology in terms of both the linguistic form and ideological functionalism.

3.2 Corpus Selection

The corpus includes 200 news articles written in English and published in the period between January 2020 and December 2025. It is a time of fast worldwide acceleration of AI in education due to the pandemic-related digitalization. Reputable media outlets were sampled purposely in North America, Europe, Asia, and the Middle East to ensure that there is a geographical diversity of articles. Purposive sampling allows picking up the texts that are informative and related to the research questions (Bryman, 2016).

The inclusion criteria were that the articles chosen must explicitly address the topic of AI as it relates to teaching, learning, assessment, student support, or educational governance. To make sure that there was divergence in genre and strength of evaluations, opinion pieces, feature articles, and investigative reports were incorporated. Posts, ads and promotion press releases were avoided to ensure reliability and journalistic credibility.

3.3 Data Analysis Procedure

Three steps were taken in data analysis. To begin with, all the articles were imported into a qualitative analysis program to be initially coded. Themes of AI complementary (AI as assistant, enhancer, or supporter), and substitutive (AI as a replacement of teachers or educational functions) were identified as dominant ones. The central CDA ideas were used to analyse lexical options, modality, metaphor, intertextual citation, and structural placement of assertions (van Dijk, 2015; Fairclough, 2015). Second, evaluative expressions were coded by the use of Appraisal Theory. The attitude resources were employed to test the emotion-based framing of AI, its competence, or aesthetic and functional values. Hedges, boosters, and attribution were examined to establish how certainty and contestability were indicated. The resources related to graduation were reviewed to define the intensification or alleviation of claims (Martin & White, 2005; Bucchi & Trench, 2021).

Third, regional comparison was done to determine the discursive differences based on cultural, technological and policy backgrounds. According to comparative media research, discourse varies between political and institutional regimes (Hallin & Mancini, 2012; Mohammed, 2025). This move revealed the trend in the ways in which Western, Asian and Middle Eastern media portray the role of AI in education in a distinct manner.

3.4 Trustworthiness and Ethics

The methodological triangulation was performed to increase credibility by combining CDA and Appraisal analysis and cross-regional comparison (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Reflexive notes were kept to a minimum in order to reduce biasness of the researcher during interpretation. The ethical factors were also minimal since the articles of the studies were publicly accessible news articles without personal data.

Data Analysis

This study has examined 200 English-language news articles concerning the coverage of AI in education published between 2020 and 2025 by major global news sources in countries of North America, Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. The corpus consisted of opinion articles, feature articles and news articles

that talked about AI tools like intelligent tutoring systems, automated grading programs, and AI-based learning systems and chatbots in education. The analysis was done using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 2015; van Dijk, 2015) and the theory of Appraisal (Martin & White, 2005), to see how the media construct AI as either complementary to human teachers or substituting them as the traditional educator. The use of evaluative language, metaphors, modality, intertextual reference, and rhetoric strategies to justify or oppose the integration of AI were given special consideration.

4.1 Artificial Intelligence (AI) as Complementary: A Discursive Construction

A prevalent conversation in the North American and European media frames AI as a complementary resource to the profession of educators as an extension and not a substitution to the teachers. These stories present AI as an efficient tool of teaching, the individualization of learning, and assisting administration. Such lexical items as assist, enhance, support and streamline were repeatedly used, which is indicative of a positive evaluative orientation of AI. The complementary discourse has several rhetorical strategies that take place: Future-oriented modality: Words such as can improve, is designed to support, and helps educators achieve demonstrate the possibility instead of the certitude with AI as an enabler technology, not a threat. Metaphors of partnership and augmentation: AI has been referred to as a teaching assistant, co-pilot, or as a collaborative partner. These similes portray AI as not replacing human agency, but fully integrated with it, which supports the complementary narrative. Human-focused framing: The use of pronouns like teachers, students, and educators is placed in the foreground, which puts human subjects in the leading position but places AI in the background. To legitimize AI as a complement, it is often mentioned that experts, researchers, or educational institutions supported it. To illustrate the point, teachers and AI experts are quoted saying that AI lessens repetitive activities and leaves teachers to concentrate on creative and socio-emotional elements of education. These sources of authority support the idea of AI as a valid, beneficial component of the educational system (Luckin et al., 2016; Holmes et al., 2019).

With the application of the Appraisal Theory, positive affect of AI complementarity can be identified through language that focuses on improvement and possibilities: “revolutionizing personalized learning, empowering teachers to concentrate on creativity, and improving student engagement. Both AI tools and the results that they produce are valued, and it is possible to perceive technology as both ethically and socially beneficial.

4.2 Construction Discursively of AI as Substitutive

In contrast, much of Asian, Middle Eastern and some Western reporting poses AI as substitutive with a focus on the possible replacement of educators, deskilling and depersonalization of learning. The discussion is based on risks, ethical issues, and social implications. The evaluative lexis that media outlets use include: replace, automate, obsolesce, surveillance and depersonalization to express apprehension. Uncertain modal verbs, such as could replace, may reduce, and might diminish, represent an affective mode of warning or fear. Such speech patterns precondition the disruptive nature of AI, meaning that the process of integration is not neutral but rather contested. Artificially intelligences are ironically described as a robot instructor, a digital monitor, or a machine boss, and invoke a fear of automation and job loss. These metaphors dramatize the substitutive potential, which focuses on the conflict of technological progress and human labor in education. In the articles, the inequity, algorithmic biasfulness, and ethical considerations of AI-driven assessment are often mentioned. The discourse of substitution is commonly associated with neoliberal or market-based educational changes, and it depicts AI as fitting efficiency indicators instead of pedagogical excellence (Selwyn, 2019; Williamson & Piattoeva, 2021). The evaluative judgments raise the risk of threat to teacher autonomy, critical thinking, social-emotive learning, making AI integration ethically and socially disputable.

4.3 Local and Geographical Differences

The comparison of the discourse shows that there are regional patterns in AI discussion: North America and Europe: Complementary framing, with a focus on teaching improvement, individualised

learning and ethical implementation. However, there are risk stories which are secondary and refer to teacher upskilling or data privacy. Asia: Hybrid narratives are created. Though, governments advocate AI to encourage efficiency and innovation, media often focus on the risks of substitutive effects especially in the testing field that has high stakes. Middle East: The news is biased towards the substitutive framing, highlighting the workforce disruption, ethical issues, and reliance on imported AI technologies. Articles tend to ask the question of whether AI does not fit the cultural values and pedagogical priorities. These differences are consistent with priorities in national policies, spending on education, as well as cultural approach toward technology and labor (Holmes et al., 2019; Luckin et al., 2016; Williamson, 2021).

4.4 Rhetoric and Linguistic Strategies

In different regions, media use a variety of strategies to justify or criticize the integration of AI: Authority-based legitimization: The use of quotes of policy makers, artificial intelligence developers, and educators provides credibility to complementary stories. On the other hand, substitutive risks are presented by expert warning or dissenting opinions. Modality and Hedging: Both discourses feature future-looking or conditional verbs to introduce AI as something potentially good or bad, to create audience expectations but not to claim that this is the case. The Evaluative Framing: There is a focus on positive appraisal on innovation, empowerment and efficiency; negative appraisal on displacement, inequity and ethical ambiguity. Metaphor and Personification: AI is anthropomorphized both as a companion in complementary stories and as a substitute or supervisor in substitutive stories, having an impact on affective reception. These approaches suggest that the discourse of media actively balances the idea of optimism and warning, and depict AI as an achievement or a problem-solver in the work of education.

4.5 Ambivalent Discourses and Hybrid Discourses

A significant number of articles are a hybrid and, at the same time, introduce AI as an enhancement to the teachers and admit possible risks of substitution. As an illustration, it is noted that AI-based

assessment tools are able to liberate the time of educators, but they should not overtrust computer-based systems. Hybrid narratives are linguistically represented in concessive forms (although AI can improve learning, it can also decrease teacher-student interaction), hedging, and modal verbs to ambivalence. This kind of discursive balancing enables the media to stay neutral, provoke a discussion, and control expectations of people towards AI in education.

Findings and Discussion

The comparison of 200 global news stories has demonstrated that media discourses create AI in education in the two types of discourses: AI as an addition to the human teacher and AI as a substitute and a possible replacement of the teacher. Such discourses are consistent with larger socio-technical imaginaries, which reflect both optimism towards technological innovation in the society and fear of automation and displacing people in the labor market (Luckin et al., 2016; Selwyn, 2019).

5.1 AI as Complementary

The media texts that represent AI as complementary tend to view AI as an assistive resource, improving the effectiveness of teaching, making learning more personalized, and cutting down on the workload of administration. Lexical analysis revealed that such verbs as assist, enhance, support, as well as the metaphors, such as co-pilot or teaching assistant were frequently used. These linguistic decisions support the image of AI as a partner and not the replacement (Holmes et.al., 2019). Potentiality modal auxiliators (can improve, may assist) also position AI as something that allows human agency and not replaces it but intertextual allusions to educators and AI researchers justify this framing as authoritative. The positive affective appraisal that is evident in this complementary discourse is congruent with the Appraisal Theory where the media focuses on progress, innovation, and the belief that people have the capacity to make a difference (Martin & White, 2005). As one example, the articles present AI as the improvement of individualized education or enabling the teacher to concentrate on creativity and critical thinking, which are educational and ethical advantages. This is a framing that is similar to the

literature that highlights the importance of AI in augmenting human judgment, instead of replacing it, in pedagogical settings (Luckin et al., 2016; Holmes et al., 2019).

5.2 AI as Substitutive

In contrast, there is a large portion of the media reporting that presents AI as a threat to the jobs of teachers through deskilling, loss of autonomy, and depersonalization of education. Such words as replace, automate, and depersonalize are combined with threat metaphors such as robot teacher and digital overseer, which have an underlying warning tone (Selwyn, 2019). These stories include conditional modality (could replace, may diminish), which underscores the uncertainty and ethical issues, establishing a feeling of possible disturbance. Substitutive discourse contains an ideological charge, in most cases, relating the implementation of AI to the requirements of neoliberalism, performance metrics, and the reorganization of the workforce (Williamson, 2021; Williamson & Piattoeva, 2021). This framing questions the validity of AI adoption by emphasizing sociocultural risks, inequity, and ethical challenges, which shows the conflict between the zeal of technology and the cautionary morals in education.

5.3 Local and Regional Dissimilarities

There were narrative inclinations of the region. In the North American and European locations, AI was popularly built as an augmentation, with a focus on ethical utilization, pedagogical development, and innovation (Holmes et al., 2019; Luckin et al., 2016). The Asian media played out as hybrid storytelling, which applauds efficiency and technological progress and warns of the dangers of substitution, especially with high stakes in examination. The Middle Eastern media were inclined towards emphasizing the discourse of substitution, as applicable to workforce, cultural compatibility and ethics. Such differences highlight the role of political, economic, and cultural contexts in framing in media (Mohammed, 2025).

5.4 Mixed and Ambivalent Discourses

Ambivalence in the media coverage was manifested through the presence of many texts with complementary and substitutive framings.

Moderating claims with concessive linguistic structures (although AI can improve learning, it can also decrease teacher-student interaction) and hedging strategies enabled outlets to recognize positive and negative aspects. This hybridization is a reflection of the multifaceted nature of the perception of AI by the population, between the optimism of technology and the social-ethical suspicion (Selwyn, 2019; Holmes et al., 2019).

Conclusion

This study has discussed the nature of global media discourse around the role of AI in education, as to whether AI as presented is supplementary or replacive of human teachers, and thus AI may take over the teaching process. The results demonstrate that media discourses are not neutral but instead serve to influence the perception of the people using the linguistic, rhetorical and evaluative discourse. The prevalence of supplementary stories in Western media focuses on AI as a collaborative aid that increases the efficiency of teaching efforts and personalizes learning and enables creative and socio-emotional involvement. Positive evaluative lexis, metaphors of collaboration (e.g., co-pilot, teaching assistant), references to experts in the field of education, and artificial intelligence, are used to justify the adoption of AI (Luckin et al., 2016; Holmes et al., 2019).

On the other hand, substitutive narratives preempt possible dangers and disruptions, such as deskilling of teachers, lessened human contact, and ethical issues. The lexical selection employed by media referring to threat or uncertainty in e.g., replace, automate and depersonalize, and metaphors such as robot teacher or digital overseer are purported to dramatize the possibilities of negative outcomes. The idea of substitutive framing becomes especially evident in the media of Asia and the Middle East, which is informed by local socio-political, cultural and policy issues of education, labor market stability, and the process of implementing technology (Selwyn, 2019; Williamson, 2021).

Another aspect mentioned in the study is the hybrid and ambivalent discourses where AI is both beneficial and potentially disruptive. Hedging, concessive structures, and modality allow the media texts to strike a balance between optimism and

caution, reflecting more ambivalence about AI in the general society. This ambivalent framing gives viewers an opportunity to think of both the possibilities and the moral or even technical issues revolving around the inclusion of AI technologies (Williamson & Piattoeva, 2021).

There are various implications of these findings. In the first place, they prove that media actively mediate the popular legitimacy of AI in education, affecting the views on the ethical legitimacy, efficiency, and pedagogical value. Second, the regional differences highlight the relevance of socio-cultural, political and policy contexts in narrative formation, implying that the implementation of AI cannot be viewed outside the local educational values and the mood of the population. Lastly, the research is methodologically significant to Critical Discourse Analysis in education, as it demonstrates how linguistic, metaphorical, and evaluative means are used to build conflicting complementarity and substitution stories (Fairclough, 2015; Martin & White, 2005).

Finally, the media outlets across the world reveal AI in education to be a two-sided phenomenon that simultaneously offers improvement and creates some issues regarding displacement. Complementary stories focus on cooperation, development, and moral advantages, and substitutive stories are the ones that anticipate danger, moral issues, and possible socio educational interruptions. The hybrid accounts also mirror the subtle and bargained characteristics of general discourse around AI. Comprehending these media constructions is essential to the policy makers, educators, and other developers of technology because the perception of the public plays a significant role in determining the application, regulation and ethical use of AI in education. Future studies are advised to investigate changes in media discourse over time as AI technologies reach a more advanced level, and the attitude of society to automation and pedagogy changes.

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