

Artificial intelligence in the public debate: risk amplifiers and mitigators in media discourse

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<https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/esmp.104293>

Received: July 30, 2025 • Accepted: November 26, 2025

Abstract. This study examines the discourse on the risks of artificial intelligence (AI) in the Spanish digital media during the first year after the launch of ChatGPT. The study identifies the types of risk and the voices that shape the public debate based on 2,705 journalistic texts collected from six Spanish newspapers between December 2022 and November 2023. The results offer a new taxonomy based on the identification of risk objects that facilitates the development of mitigation strategies. The most frequently addressed in the media are “risks to civilization and humanity” and “risks to individuals.” The predominant voices are the media, regulators, and companies, with civil society underrepresented. The analysis reveals changes in the representation of AI risks and in the actors participating in the public debate. It is perceived that some representatives of technology companies could be promoting long-term existential risks for their own interests, diverting attention from immediate risks and hindering greater regulation of AI. Furthermore, by presenting AI as an abstract and uncontrollable force, the perception of human responsibility in its development and regulation is diluted. At the same time, other voices are emerging that minimize these risks and seek to discredit those who warn of their possible consequences

Keywords. Artificial intelligence, risk discourse, digital media, public sphere, social actors.

ES Inteligencia artificial en el debate público: amplificadores y mitigadores de riesgos en el discurso mediático

Resumen. El estudio examina el discurso sobre los riesgos de la inteligencia artificial (IA) en los medios digitales españoles durante el primer año tras el lanzamiento de ChatGPT. Se identifica los tipos de riesgo y las voces que configuran el debate público a partir de 2705 textos periodísticos recopilados en seis periódicos españoles entre diciembre de 2022 y noviembre de 2023. Los resultados ofrecen una taxonomía basada en identificación de objetos de riesgo que facilita el desarrollo de estrategias de mitigación. Los más abordados en los medios son los «riesgos para la civilización y la humanidad» y los «riesgos para las personas». Las voces predominantes son medios de comunicación, reguladores y empresas, con una infrarrepresentación de la sociedad civil. El análisis revela cambios en la representación de los riesgos de la IA y en los actores que participan en el debate público. Se percibe que algunos representantes de empresas tecnológicas podrían estar promoviendo los riesgos existenciales a largo plazo con fines de interés propio, desviando la atención de los riesgos inmediatos y dificultando una mayor regulación de la IA. Además, al presentar la IA como una fuerza abstracta e incontrolable, se diluye la percepción de la responsabilidad humana en su desarrollo y regulación. Al mismo tiempo, surgen otras voces que minimizan estos riesgos y buscan desacreditar a quienes advierten sobre sus posibles consecuencias.

Palabras clave. Inteligencia artificial, discurso del riesgo, medios digitales, esfera pública, actores sociales.

How to cite: García-Orosa, B., González-Arias, C., Forja-Pena, T., & Gutiérrez-Caneda, B. (2026). Artificial intelligence in the public debate: risk amplifiers and mitigators in media discourse. *Estudios sobre el Mensaje Periodístico*, 32(1), 1-14. <https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/esmp.104293>

1. The discourse of AI risk in media communication

1.1. AI in the public sphere

The development and adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) are contributing to the reconfiguration of the foundations of communication and the public sphere. This technology is influencing both how people access information and how they interact and participate in social life (Köstler & Ossewaarde, 2022). In recent years, AI, especially generative AI, has become increasingly integrated into the public sphere, having an impact that goes beyond mere technological optimisation. Its applications are shaping the essential functions of shared spaces, ranging from the construction of discourses to the formation of publics and counterpublics (Jungherr & Schroeder, 2023). In a public sphere increasingly influenced by AI (Zeng *et al.*, 2022), short-term transformations are closely intertwined with structural changes, driven by automated decision-making systems that are sometimes perceived as more reliable or effective than human judgement (Araujo *et al.*, 2020). Against this backdrop, recurring debates that have historically accompanied technological innovation are resurfacing, heightening the tensions between commercial interests and civic responsibility. While some voices point to modern capitalism as an ideology that drives uncontrolled AI development, others emphasise the rationality of civil society as a force for meaningful improvements in quality of life (Winkel, 2024).

In recent years, scientific literature has highlighted two perspectives. On the one hand, the concept of “sociotechnical blindness” (Johnson & Verdicchio, 2017) stresses the need to recognise the central role of human beings in the design and implementation of AI systems, challenging the idea of autonomous technological development detached from its social context. On the other hand, concerns about ethical and moral dilemmas associated with AI have gained prominence (Harris & Anthis, 2021), including its potential influence on human emotions (Ho *et al.*, 2023). In this framework, González-Arias and López-García (2025) note that the ethical debate surrounding AI’s social impact is dominated by techno-pessimism, a narrative that highlights the risks and potential negative consequences of AI for society. This perspective has significant implications for the public sphere, where news organisations play a pivotal role in both critically monitoring these developments and shaping the social imaginaries that influence public perceptions (Simón, 2023).

1.2. Media and perception

The integration of AI, particularly generative AI (GenAI), into journalism is profoundly reshaping the media landscape. It has been argued that this phenomenon undermines the traditional role of media professionals, disrupting conventional news production processes and giving rise to important ethical debates (Calvo-Rubio & Ufarte-Ruiz, 2021; Forja-Pena *et al.*, 2024; Shi & Sun, 2024).

Beyond being disrupted by technological transformations (Gutiérrez-Caneda *et al.*, 2023;

Peterson-Salahuddin & Diakopoulos, 2020), the media play a pivotal role as creators and disseminators of social imaginaries. Amid the ongoing debate surrounding disintermediation (Mancini, 2020), media outlets are facing the challenge of maintaining their central role in shaping the public sphere as well as their position as key disseminators of scientific knowledge (Zarouali *et al.*, 2021).

Research on audience perceptions underscores the media’s critical role in disseminating information about AI (Brewer *et al.*, 2022). According to Choi (2024), balanced coverage that presents both the positive and negative aspects of AI can significantly influence public attitudes, particularly when different temporal framing is used. For instance, presenting AI as a near-future phenomenon, as opposed to something distant, increases the perceived seriousness of its associated risks and reduces public support for its development (Choi, 2024).

Furthermore, Choi (2024) found that the order in which risks and benefits are presented affects the impact of the message. The effect is more pronounced when risks are presented before benefits. Choi suggests that framing AI’s risks and benefits in a balanced manner, avoiding contradictions, has the potential to shift public opinion, as temporal framing subtly affects how people prioritise each aspect of the message. Similarly, Bingaman *et al.* (2021) emphasise the importance of framing in shaping attitudes toward AI. Their study demonstrates that participants exposed to a ‘social progress’ frame expressed greater support for AI compared to those exposed to a ‘Pandora’s box’ frame.

Further research suggests differentiated perceptions of AI depending on the cultural context and role played by the media. Nguyen and Hekman (2024) note similarities in the recognition of AI’s potential and versatility, but highlight significant cultural differences in how risks and conflicts associated with AI are portrayed across various scenarios. Scott Hansen (2022) also emphasises this cultural specificity, pointing out that while social imaginaries around AI often function on a global or transnational scale, they acquire particular significance when framed within the context of social institutions at the national and local levels, where they directly influence specific social practices.

Additional studies explore the influence of the news ecosystem and media ideologies, demonstrating that conservative-leaning media outlets tend to focus primarily on AI’s positive aspects, emphasising its benefits. In contrast, progressive media often highlight concerns about crisis, ethical issues, and the need for regulation (Chang, 2024). Although these discourses shape audience perceptions of AI (Brewer *et al.*, 2024), the public is frequently portrayed as a passive recipient, with limited insight into its expectations, assumptions, and knowledge.

1.3. Artificial intelligence and risk

While some studies suggest that media coverage of AI and automation has generally been more positive than negative over time (Cools *et al.*, 2024), fears surrounding these developments have been

increasingly present in the press (Johnson & Verdicchio, 2017), framed within the broader conceptualisation of digital risk (Sundberg, 2024).

Similarly, Marres *et al.* (2024) emphasise that contemporary AI is widely perceived as a controversial and potentially harmful technology for society. In contrast, the risks surrounding other technologies, such as nuclear energy or genetically modified food, were historically minimised or even denied by corporations. According to these authors, the controversies around AI go beyond disputes over specific scientific claims, addressing broader structural issues related to social justice, political economy, and ethics, as highlighted at the beginning of this article. González-Arias and López-García (2024) argue that national contexts play a critical role in shaping how the press conveys AI-associated risks, reflecting a tailoring of messages to different audience expectations and communication priorities.

This perception of risk is sometimes linked to the concept of existential risks, which gained prominence in 2014 (Neri & Cozman, 2020). Sartori and Bocca (2023) note that AI discourses are characterised by both utopian and dystopian exaggerations, encompassing themes such as immortality versus dehumanisation, freedom versus obsolescence, gratification versus alienation, and domination versus uprising.

The launch of tools like ChatGPT and DALL-E has ignited intense debates about the potential dangers of generative AI (GenAI) to society (Winkel, 2024). The findings indicate that ChatGPT has amplified not only public enthusiasm and expectations surrounding AI, but also the associated concerns and fears, while simultaneously drawing attention to national competition in technological development. However, public discourses around GenAI are often conflicting, characterised by abstract, grandiose narratives that hinder the building of consensus and development of practical knowledge (Wang & Liang, 2024).

The launch of ChatGPT in November 2022 undoubtedly marked a technological milestone that triggered an intense media discourse during its first 100 days. This discourse highlighted the strengths of these technologies, their economic potential, the urgent need for regulatory frameworks, ethical challenges they pose, and their inherent limitations, such as the inability to differentiate between true and false information (González-Arias & López-García, 2023). These elements underscore the complexity of AI's impact on the public sphere, where expectations, fears, and structural challenges coexist and continue to shape the debate.

2. Methodology

Research was conducted from the perspectives of discourse analysis and communication studies to explore the media discourse on risks associated with developments in artificial intelligence (AI) following the launch of ChatGPT in November 2022.

From a discursive standpoint, risk statements describe the potential negative effects, whether real or perceived, that a particular event may have

on the population (Hansson, 2023). Accordingly, risk discourse is defined as the set of statements that express concerns, uncertainties, and potential negative impacts on individuals, social cohesion, or the environment associated with a specific situation or event.

This qualitative research is based on a corpus of journalistic texts in which risk statements were identified. Using the risk object as a criterion, a taxonomy was developed to analyse both the occurrence of risk statements and their evolution in the public debate. The voices responsible for these statements, whether the authors of the articles or the cited sources, were also identified and classified into six categories. Ambiguous fragments were discussed collectively until consensus was reached, and exclusion criteria were established for financial uses ("venture capital"), healthcare uses or uses not related to AI. To better capture recurring patterns in the corpus, descriptive counts were incorporated to highlight tendencies in the distribution of risk statements and the prominence of different actor categories. The study aims to answer three key research questions:

RQ1. What AI-related risks were prevalent in Spanish digital media during the first year following the launch of ChatGPT?

RQ2. Which social actors are participating in the public debate on AI risks within the public media space?

RQ3. What role do Spanish digital media play in shaping the public debate on AI risks?

The following sections outline the procedures used to compile the corpus and identify risk statements, as well as the methods employed to analyse and classify them.

2.1. Corpus compilation

A corpus of 2,705 texts was constructed using six Spanish national digital media outlets. Using the Factiva database, we employed the acronym 'AI' (IA) as a keyword to gather all news articles published over a 12-month period, from December 2022 to November 2023.

We focus on the first year after the launch of ChatGPT because this period constitutes a foundational moment in the public debate on generative AI. During those months, the narrative frameworks, dominant actors, and types of risk that continue to be reproduced in the Spanish press and in subsequent regulatory debates were established. The texts were compiled by month and by newspaper (72 files). A purposive sample of six Spanish media outlets was selected: *El Mundo*, *El País*, *20 Minutos*, *Infolibre*, *El Confidencial*, and *ElDiario.es*. The selection criteria aimed to ensure diversity in terms of both editorial ideologies and the nature of the outlets. The sample included media with centre-right and centre-left editorial lines, as well as both digital-native and traditional news formats, representing the heterogeneity of the Spanish media landscape. This approach helped prevent the sample from becoming excessively large, which could have hindered the analysis.

Table 1. Monthly distribution of AI-related articles in Spanish digital media (the months (1-12) follow a chronological order, where 1 represents December 2022 and 12 corresponds to November 2023).

Digital media outlet	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	T
<i>El Mundo</i>	21	7	10	8	22	30	26	21	8	29	28	38	248
<i>El País</i>	10	11	10	15	23	38	26	12	11	30	23	46	255
<i>20 Minutos</i>	33	60	77	78	98	124	63	51	68	79	81	155	967
<i>Infolibre</i>	5	6	3	4	4	7	4	6	6	6	4	7	62
<i>El Confidencial</i>	16	27	46	83	67	76	79	71	72	93	112	94	836
<i>ElDiario.es</i>	13	16	10	19	20	41	23	20	23	40	41	71	337
Total	98	127	156	207	234	316	221	181	188	277	289	411	2705

Source: Own production.

2.2. Identification

To identify risk statements, the term “risk” (riesgo) was used, in both singular and plural, to automatically select all text fragments containing this word. The initial search yielded 906 text fragments, identified as potential risk statements. Subsequently, a manual analysis was conducted to exclude fragments where the word “risk” appeared in contexts

unrelated to artificial intelligence, such as “venture capital” (capital de riesgo) or “health risks” (riesgos de enfermedad). After this process, 878 fragments directly linked to AI-related risks were identified, of which 547 indicated a risk object and were included in the taxonomy. The table below presents the data obtained during the selection and classification process (Table 2):

Table 2. Identification of risk statements.

Newspaper	Texts that included the acronym “AI”	Text fragments with the word “risk”	Text fragments with the word “risk” in the context of AI	Statements indicating a risk object
<i>20 Minutos</i>	967	256	218	128
<i>El Confidencial</i>	836	111	282	154
<i>ElDiario.es</i>	337	192	119	85
<i>El Mundo</i>	248	127	82	57
<i>El País</i>	255	147	121	76
<i>Infolibre</i>	62	73	56	48
Total	2705	906	878	547

Source: Own production.

The selected statements were categorised according to the type of risk they referred to. The literature on risk identifies at least six components that structure the risk discourse: assessment, potentiality, probability, consequences, source of risk, and object at risk (Boholm, 2017; Steimers and Schneider, 2022). For this analysis, the criterion of the risk object—specifically, who or what could be affected by AI—was adopted, enabling the construction of a risk taxonomy.

At the same time, the voices participating in the debate were classified according to their social role, with particular emphasis on actors from academia, tech companies, and the political arena, among others. This classification is justified from a functional perspective, based on the roles these actors play in the public media space. An example of analysis is provided below:

According to Professor Nick Bostrom, director of the Future of Humanity Institute at Oxford University, AI may become the “greatest existential risk”, ahead of climate change and other threats. (Suárez, 2023)

Risk object: Risks to civilisation and humanity (existential risk).

Voice: academics and experts (Nick Bostrom, Oxford University).

The established risk categories and voice groups were analysed according to their distribution over a 12-month period. These procedures allowed us to identify the main discourses on risks in the Spanish digital media during the period under study. They also made it possible to ascertain how the public debate on AI is constructed and organised, in terms of both the types of risks and participants involved.

3. Results

The results identify the risks discussed in Spanish digital media and the voices that participated in the debate over the 12-month period following the launch of ChatGPT.

3.1. Taxonomy of AI risk objects

AI-related risks can manifest at various levels and, unlike other risks, such as those related to nuclear energy, radon gas, or tobacco use, they are often indirect and multidimensional. These risks tend to be

more complex, as they are always conditioned by human decisions and uses.

The primary AI-related risks include disinformation, biases, job destruction, the creation of autonomous weapons, and, in the most extreme scenarios, the risk of extinction. Because these risks vary significantly in terms of scope, impact, and groups that could be affected, it is essential to establish a classification criterion that allows for their systematic organisation. For this reason, we used the criterion of “risk objects”, which identifies those potentially affected in each risk context.

This classification is essential to not only understand the nature of the risks, but also identify effective mitigation strategies tailored to the specific characteristics of each context and affected group. Based on the results, a taxonomy was developed to organise the risks into seven main categories, outlined below:

- **Risks to civilisation and humanity.** These risks have the potential to cause severe damage or even threaten the continuity of human civilisation.
- **Risks to individuals.** These risks directly impact people, whether personally,

psychologically, or in terms of their fundamental rights.

- **Risks to the economy.** AI-based automation directly impacts the structure and dynamics of the markets and global economy.
- **Risks to social groups.** In this case, the risk object is a group or community, due to its size or specific characteristics.
- **Risks to institutions.** AI systems may impact the operation, trust, and legitimacy of public and private institutions.
- **Risks to technological systems and critical infrastructure.** AI systems may also pose risks to the technological infrastructure that supports them and to other critical systems.
- **Risks to the environment.** AI technologies may also impact the natural environment.

Table 3 shows different AI-related “risk objects”, organised according to the number of mentions received. This classification contains the risk statements used for our analysis.

Table 3. Risk objects.

Risk object	N	%
1. Risks to civilisation and humanity	152	27.7
2. Risks to individuals	145	26.5
3. Risks to the economy	98	17.9
4. Risks to social groups	57	10.4
5. Risks to institutions	47	8.6
6. Risks to technological systems and critical infrastructure	44	8.0
7. Risks to the environment	5	0.9

Source: Own production.

When disaggregated, the most prevalent discourse (27.7%) concerns risk to civilisation and humanity. This includes warnings about the potential loss of control over superintelligent systems and existential threats such as pandemics or nuclear war. It also highlights the destabilising effects AI could have on social and geopolitical structures through autonomous weaponry, disinformation campaigns, and espionage. A similarly significant portion of the discourse (26.5%) focuses on risks to individuals, particularly job displacement, loss of privacy, mass surveillance, and behavioural manipulation through algorithmic systems. These concerns also include the perpetuation of biases, identity impersonation, and violations of fundamental human rights. Economic risks account for 17.9% of the discourse. These include fears around job automation, increasing inequality, and the growing concentration of power in large technology corporations. The emergence of financial bubbles driven by speculative over-investment in AI is also flagged as a potential threat. Risks to social groups (10.4%) highlight how algorithmic systems

can reproduce systemic biases present in training data, disproportionately impact marginalised communities, contribute to the dehumanisation of labour, and obscure accountability through opaque decision-making processes. To a lesser extent, institutional risks (8.6%) are discussed, including disinformation, cyberattacks, and the erosion of state sovereignty resulting from the dominance of tech monopolies. Similarly, 8.0% of the discourse addresses risks to technological systems and critical infrastructure, such as AI “hallucinations”, security vulnerabilities, and the lack of robust control mechanisms. Finally, environmental risks (0.9%) are noted, especially those related to the high energy consumption and ecological impact of large-scale AI models. Together, these discourses outline a complex and multifaceted map of tensions, underscoring the ongoing struggle between the transformative promise of AI and the urgent need for effective regulation and governance.

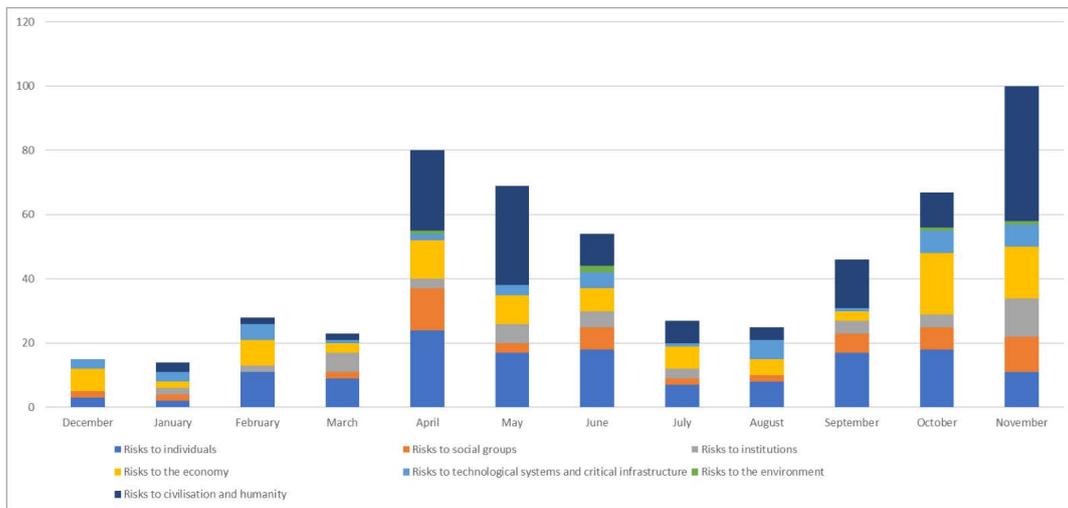
A detailed description of this taxonomy, including illustrative examples, can be found in González-Arias *et al.* (2025).

3.2. Evolution of risks over the 12-month period following the launch of ChatGPT

By examining the risk discourses presented by digital media over the 12 months following the launch of

ChatGPT, we can identify significant changes in their public presentation.

Figure 1. Evolution of the public discussion of risks over the period (from December 2022 to November 2023).



Source: Own research.

Figure 1 shows the monthly distribution of media interest across seven categories of AI-related risks, with a total of 548 mentions during the year. When analysing all risk categories together, uneven media coverage is observed, with peaks in April (80 mentions), May (69), and November (100), most likely linked to key events or times of particular relevance in the public debate on AI. In contrast, the lows recorded in July (27) and August (25) reflect the summer break in Spain, a period when the topic of risk seems to lose urgency in the media agenda. As noted, the risks receiving the greatest attention pertain to “civilisation and humanity” (152 total mentions), reflecting sustained interest in AI’s existential impact, particularly in the months of April (25 mentions), May (31), and November (42).

“Risks to individuals” also stand out, accumulating 145 total mentions, with peaks of interest in April (24) and during the last quarter (September–November). In contrast, ‘risks to the environment’ (5 total mentions) and “technological systems” (44 mentions) receive significantly less attention. Overall, Chart 1 shows that AI-related risks generate episodic media interest, with a focus on risks with broad implications, such as social, economic, and existential risks, while others, such as environmental risks, receive less attention.

These results clearly show that media attention to AI risks fluctuates, with certain risks gaining prominence in specific months while others fade. Coverage of existential risks (to civilisation and humanity) and personal risks (to individuals) dominated the discussion in the second half of the year, perhaps reflecting an increase in public and media concern about these types of risks. Risks to the economy and institutions, although relevant at the beginning of the period, progressively lose attention, possibly due to a shift in focus or the emergence of new issues.

3.3. Voices participating in the discussion of AI risks

After the voices responsible for articulating the risks were identified, they were categorised based on their broader social roles. The voices of actors engaged in the media debate on AI are organised into six key categories:

- 1. Media and journalist voices:** Includes media outlets and journalists who act as mediators between the other actors and the general public.
- 2. Government and regulator voices:** Includes state agencies, politicians, and regulators who discuss, create, and apply public policies and legal frameworks for the use of AI.
- 3. Business and private sector voices:** Representatives from technology companies, start-ups, and corporations developing and implementing AI solutions are part of this group.
- 4. Academic and expert voices:** This group consists of researchers, scientists, and academics who study AI’s development and implications from technical, philosophical, and ethical perspectives.
- 5. Public and user voices:** Representatives of ordinary people, consumers, and end-users of AI-driven technologies.
- 6. Third sector and NGO voices:** Representatives of non-governmental organisations and third-sector entities that advocate for the responsible and ethical use of AI.

Table 4 shows the participation by percentages of different social actors in the debate on AI risks and development.

Table 4. Voices participating in the public media debate on AI risks.

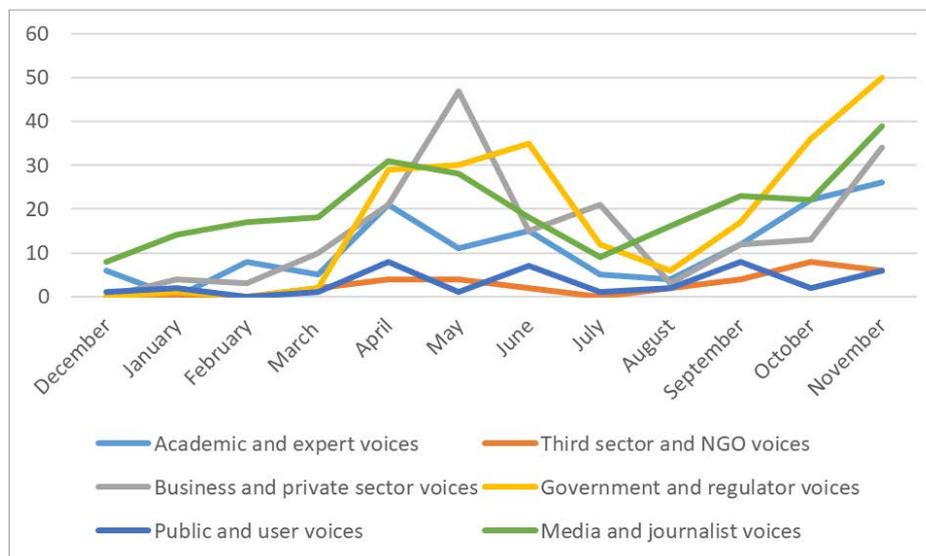
Voices	N	%
Media and journalist voices	243	28.6
Government and regulator voices	218	25.6
Business and private sector voices	183	21.5
Academic and expert voices	135	15.9
Public and user voices	39	4.6
Third sector and NGO voices	32	3.8

Source: Own production.

The group most actively involved, based on the number of mentions or participations (28.6%), consists of media and journalist voices. Following closely are government and regulator voices (25.6%). Business and private sector voices rank third (21.5%), ahead of academic and expert voices (15.9%). In contrast, the participation of public and user voices (4.6%) and third sector and NGO voices

(3.8%) is comparatively lower. These figures indicate that their influence on the AI debate is relatively limited when compared to more dominant sectors, such as the media, government, and business. This data highlights the strong representation of the media and regulators, while revealing the continued underrepresentation of the general public and NGOs in this discussion.

Figure 2. Voices in the debate on AI risks over 12 months.



Source: Own production.

Figure 2 shows the monthly distribution of social actor voices participating in the debate on AI risks over the course of a year. Participation varies significantly among the groups, with ‘media and journalist voices’ (243 total mentions) and ‘government and regulator voices’ (218 mentions) predominating. In contrast, groups such as third-sector NGOs are far less represented (32 mentions).

“Media and journalist voices” maintain consistent participation throughout the year, with peaks in April (31 mentions), May (28), October (23), and November (39). These spikes likely correspond to periods of heightened public interest or major AI-related events. “Government and regulator voices” show a steady increase over time, with a peak in May (30 mentions) and a significant rise in November (50 mentions), suggesting growing regulatory involvement in the debate. Meanwhile, “business and private sector voices” are strongly represented in May (47 mentions), possibly due to the presentation of important technological initiatives or developments.

In contrast, the participation of “third sector and NGO voices” and “public and user voices” remains limited throughout the year, indicating that these groups have less influence on the media discourse. The overall trend suggests that the debate is dominated by institutional, business, and media actors, while community and public voices are secondary. This pattern reflects a discussion focused primarily on technical, economic, and political perspectives, with less emphasis on social or citizen concerns.

Throughout the year, there was a steady increase in the participation of government and regulator voices in the debate. This rise coincided with the discussion and implementation of various AI laws and regulations across multiple countries and the European Union, suggesting a growing presence of these actors in the media discourse, particularly in the final months of the year. This trend underscores both the natural delay in lawmaking and the increasing significance of regulatory frameworks in shaping the public agenda on AI.

3.4. Events influencing media coverage of risks

Based on the evolution of media coverage of AI risks in 2023, we were able to identify the events that most impacted the media agenda. These events likely not only heightened media interest, but also influenced how different types of AI risks were prioritised and framed. As we can observe, while risks to individuals and the economy maintain a constant presence, reflecting practical concerns around privacy, disinformation, and employment, risks to civilisation and humanity dominate the narrative during months associated with events emphasising catastrophic dangers. These include the open letters published by leaders of AI development and the AI Safety Summit. Peaks in media coverage coincide with these landmark events, underscoring their role in shaping public perceptions of AI risks and the urgency of addressing their ethical, social, and economic challenges.

3.4.1. Open letter of 22 March 2023

In this letter, influential figures such as Elon Musk and Yuval Noah Harari called for a six-month pause in the development of advanced AI systems, highlighting the need to establish shared security protocols. This call to action underscored the structural and ethical risks associated with the uncontrolled development of these technologies. March saw a moderate increase in media coverage of AI risks, with relevant mentions of risks to individuals (9 mentions) and risks to institutions (6 mentions). This emphasis reflects the letter's impact in triggering initial media concern about AI risks.

3.4.2. Statement of 30 May 2023

In this brief statement, experts highlighted the possibility of human extinction from AI, comparing it to pandemics and nuclear wars, and stressed the urgency of mitigating these risks in a coordinated manner worldwide. In addition to direct references to the statement, in May, there was a significant increase in mentions of risks to civilisation and humanity (31 mentions), reflecting how the text amplified existential risk narratives, prioritising extreme scenarios in the media discourse. Furthermore, the increase in mentions of risks to individuals (17 mentions) and the economy (9 mentions) suggests an expansion of the debate to include more practical implications.

3.4.3. AI Safety Summit, November 2023

This event brought together global leaders and experts to discuss AI-related risks, such as cybersecurity and biotechnology, culminating in the Bletchley Declaration, which emphasised the importance of international collaboration to collectively manage potential risks. November saw the highest peak in media coverage (100 mentions in total). Risks to civilisation and humanity (42 mentions) predominated, highlighting the international emphasis on existential dangers and the pressing need for regulation. Other relevant risks included those to institutions (12 mentions) and the economy (16 mentions), reflecting concerns about governance, economic stability, and cybersecurity.

3.4.4. OpenAI leadership crisis, November 2023

The removal and subsequent reinstatement of Sam Altman as CEO of OpenAI sparked intense debate around corporate governance and ethical challenges in AI development. This event brought internal and external tensions to the forefront, particularly regarding transparency and decision-making within tech companies. As a result, there was an increase in mentions of risks to institutions (12 mentions) and the economy (16 mentions) in November, reinforcing the perception that the concentration of power within large tech companies poses a structural threat.

The analysed events served as catalysts for the media discourse on AI risks. While existential risks dominated during high-profile moments, fuelled by the open letters and AI Safety Summit, more tangible risks—such as those related to individuals and the economy—maintained a consistent presence, highlighting practical concerns. These patterns illustrate how specific milestones influenced both media focus and public perception of AI risks, underscoring the need for informed, balanced coverage.

3.5. The public debate on AI risks

This analysis of risk statements also revealed key characteristics of the media debate surrounding AI. In this context, voices were identified that address the issue of assigning responsibility for the intentional propagation of risks, as well as the involvement of various actors who tend to downplay their significance. These aspects are explored further below.

3.5.1. The public debate on AI risks

The analysed texts offer potential explanations for the interests underlying the discussion of AI risks. In some cases, the promotion of these risks appears to be influenced by the commercial and strategic interests of the tech companies themselves. A central issue in this debate is how certain companies may be driving the narrative that AI poses an existential risk. This would benefit them by diverting attention from the immediate risks to avoid stricter regulations that could hinder their short-term growth.

Firstly, tech companies seem to be fostering a narrative that portrays AI as such an advanced and powerful force that citizens feel powerless in the face of it, thus discouraging government regulation: "The tech industry wants us to feel powerless over AI to prevent us from regulating it" (Suárez, 2023).

Secondly, it is suggested that companies like OpenAI would prefer to focus on discussions of AI's future existential risks, rather than addressing the current challenges posed by its applications and unregulated business expansion. This approach would prevent laws or regulations from being passed that could limit their operations in the present: "One possible explanation behind the manifestos is that companies like OpenAI prefer politicians to focus on debating apocalyptic, future existential risks rather than on laws that could inhibit their expansion today" (Pérez Colomé, 2023).

Tegmark, a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and head of a

non-profit organisation focused on preventing technology from generating large-scale, extreme risks, believes it is in the interest of companies to deepen the divide between people concerned with equity issues and those focused on existential risks, in order to avoid regulation. (Schechner & Seetharaman, 2023)

“It’s obvious that these guys benefit from the hype still being fuelled,” says Daniel Schoenberger, a former Google lawyer who worked on the company’s 2018 AI ethical principles list and is currently at Web3 Foundation. He adds that policymakers should focus more on short-term risks, such as AI making it cheaper to set up campaigns to spread false and misleading information, or concentrating more power in Silicon Valley. (Schechner & Seetharaman, 2023)

Thirdly, by focusing on AI’s abstract dangers, insufficient attention is paid to the companies that control its development and deployment, giving them a sort of “free pass” for their activities. Human responsibility behind AI becomes invisible, with AI treated as an entity in its own right and almost personified.

Émile Torres, from Leibniz University Hannover, who has been studying these theories of future annihilation for years, notes: “A lot of focus is placed on AI, but not so much on the AI companies. This attention gives these companies a kind of free pass”. (Pérez Colomé, 2023)

Fourthly, a critique of the apocalyptic AI narrative emerges:

This movement is increasingly met with opposition. One of its most vocal critics, Marc Andreessen, a long-time Silicon Valley investor, recalls that “the fear that technology of our own creation will rise up and destroy us is deeply coded into our culture.” He believes that with AI, the myth of Prometheus, Frankenstein, or the Terminator is being revived. “The AI risk cult has all the hallmarks of a millenarian apocalypse cult”. (Jiménez, 2023)

Finally, the hypothesis of self-serving promotion may also have a strategic component for companies seeking to gain an advantage in the AI race.

The magnate [Elon Musk] had signed a petition, along with 1,100 AI experts, urging major companies in the sector to slow down the rapid development of their models. While he may have used the risks they could pose if unregulated as an excuse, it could also have been a tactic to buy time for his new company. (Holgado, 2023)

3.5.2. Downplaying the risks

The position countering those who emphasise or promote AI’s apocalyptic risks offers several key arguments. One is that the benefits of AI far outweigh

its risks, and the doomsday scenarios presented by some are speculative at best.

On one side, there are those who are wary of excessive scaremongering. “No one could have predicted such a huge disruption, but worrying about the risk of superintelligence at this point is like worrying about overpopulation on Mars,” ironizes Óscar Cordón, a professor of AI at the University of Granada. (Terrasa, 2023)

This position stresses that superhuman AI, which could pose a risk to the existence of humanity, is still far from being a reality.

“Superhuman AI is nowhere near the top of the list of existential risks, largely because it doesn’t exist yet. It’s too soon to discuss how to make it safe,” he wrote on Twitter. This existential hyperbole grants AI a capacity that we still don’t know that it has. (Pérez Colomé, 2023)

Critics argue that warnings about existential risks have no scientific basis.

“I don’t think that there is an existential risk,” Mitchell shot back, adding that people are working hard “on mitigating the more immediate real-world risks” [...] Mitchell said in an interview that the discussion over existential risk “is all based on speculation; there’s really no science”. (Schechner & Seetharaman, 2023)

Another argument is that although AI poses risks, they are manageable: “While the US tycoon has been rather alarmist on other occasions, in his last post on his personal blog, Gates recognised that “AI risks are real, but manageable” (Gascón, 2023). It is also argued that AI itself could help mitigate the risks:

To mitigate these risks, cybersecurity companies are using AI to protect users from such attacks. For example, AI-based systems can be used to detect and block malicious social engineering attempts by analysing and identifying communication patterns. (Corrons, 2023)

Or that fears over AI are unfounded:

Former UK Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg, who is now President, Global Affairs at Meta (Facebook), claims that AI is caught in a “great hype cycle”, generating unfounded fears, just as video games did in the 1980s. “There were moral panics about radio, the bicycle, the internet,” he says. (Maza, 2023)

4. Discussion

This research provides an overview of the evolution of discourse surrounding AI-related risks in Spanish digital media between November 2022 and November 2023. It analyses the types of risks prioritised in the public debate, the social actors involved, and the key characteristics of the discussion. It also identifies the events that had the greatest impact on

the media agenda related to AI risks, along with other relevant findings that enhance our understanding of the media's role in the public debate.

Among the key findings, the most notable is the exponential increase in media coverage of AI, which quadrupled during the period under analysis. This surge reflects growing public attention to this technology, characterised by monthly fluctuations and culminating in a significant peak one year after the launch of ChatGPT. This pattern suggests an intensification of the public debate on AI, aligning with previous research that underscores how technological milestones generate both excitement and concern over AI (Winkel, 2024).

The analysis allowed for the development of a taxonomy that classifies risks into seven main categories, based on the consideration of the individuals or groups affected by these risks. In this study, risks to civilisation and humanity emerge as the most prominent. The media's focus on existential risks reflects a catastrophic narrative that, while raising public awareness, may also contribute to disproportionately negative perceptions. Furthermore, Sartori and Bocca (2023) observe that these extreme narratives often oscillate between utopian and dystopian visions, reinforcing polarised views on emerging technologies. This aligns with Sundberg (2024), who notes that the prevailing narrative surrounding digital risks in society is characterised by an ongoing concern with vulnerability to technological systems.

Risks to individuals, the second-most frequently mentioned group, highlight specific concerns regarding privacy, information manipulation, and personal autonomy. These findings suggest that artificial intelligence is perceived not only as an abstract existential threat but also as a tangible risk to everyday life. This aligns with the growing debate surrounding the use of surveillance technologies and generative AI tools, which facilitate disinformation and identity theft. Here, the media narrative appears to oscillate between warnings about the malicious use of AI and calls for regulation, highlighting both a demand for increased government oversight and the ethical dilemmas surrounding the implementation of these technologies.

The economy is the third-most significant risk group in Spanish media, reflecting concerns about AI's impact on employment, labour market stability, and the potential monopolisation of key sectors. This perspective highlights how automation and the concentration of power in large tech companies could reshape the global economic landscape, exacerbating inequalities and posing risks to workers. As demonstrated, the media have played a key role in raising awareness of these threats, highlighting the indirect effects AI's expansion could have on the economy. This discourse reflects both genuine concern about economic disruption and resistance to rapid technological adoption, particularly in traditional sectors that may be disrupted.

In the public debate surrounding AI risks, the primary social actors are media and government representatives, who are positioned as the main constructors of this discourse. This suggests that the perception of risks around AI is heavily influenced and framed by authority figures and information channels. While business sector and academic voices

are relevant, their visibility does not match that of the media and government actors. Meanwhile, the limited participation of NGOs and civil society in general raises questions about the representativeness of the voices fuelling the discussion. This suggests a potential "participation gap" in the public debate on AI, where corporate and government interests dominate the narrative, to the detriment of a more diverse and pluralistic perspective.

Peaks in the discussion of AI's existential risks coincide with key events during the period under analysis. Public statements by experts, international events, and corporate crises were found to significantly influence the perception of AI's potential dangers.

Another significant finding of this study is the identification of voices challenging the self-serving propagation of risks. They suggest that some companies may be promoting a long-term risk narrative to divert attention from the immediate and current risks. This strategy, highlighted in the news articles, suggests a possible manipulation of public discourse, where fears of an uncertain, catastrophic future are fuelled, while more urgent issues like data protection and AI fairness are downplayed. This aligns with Choi's (2024) observation that framing AI risks as distant serves certain regulatory interests. Furthermore, presenting AI as an abstract, uncontrollable entity diminishes the perception of human responsibility for its development and regulation. This mirrors a recurring pattern in media coverage identified by Bunz and Braghieri (2022), where personification plays a central role.

The viewpoint that contrasts with alarmist perspectives on AI's apocalyptic risks offers a series of arguments grounded in a balanced analysis of these extreme scenarios, while also highlighting the technology's potential to address current challenges. On the one hand, it is argued that AI's benefits far outweigh its risks, and that predictions of a threatening, superhuman AI are premature and lack a scientific basis. Existential risks, it is claimed, are based more on conjecture than solid evidence, underscoring the need to focus on immediate, real risks. Furthermore, it is argued that AI risks are manageable and the technology itself could play a crucial role in mitigating these risks, as demonstrated by advances in cybersecurity. Finally, it is suggested that the heightened fears surrounding AI are part of a "hype cycle", reminiscent of other historical episodes of technological moral panic, highlighting the need for a balanced, evidence-based analysis.

Overall, a picture emerges, as described by Sundberg (2024), of a society where technological advancements create new types of risks affecting both individuals and social structures. He calls them digital risks, which are more abstract, intangible, and global, yet have direct and immediate impacts on everyday life. The public discourse surrounding GenAI remains conflicted and in its early stages, dominated by abstract narratives that hinder consensus-building and the generation of practical knowledge, as Wang and Liang (2024) observe.

5. Conclusions

This study analysed the risk discourse surrounding artificial intelligence (AI) in Spanish digital media during the first year following the launch of ChatGPT.

Regarding the AI-related risks identified in digital media (RQ1), one of the key contributions of this research is the proposal of a risk taxonomy based on the identification of risk objects—i.e., the groups or elements potentially affected—. This approach captures the unique complexity of AI-related risks, which, unlike traditional risks, are indirect, multidimensional, and always contingent upon human usage. In addition to providing a more precise understanding of these risks, the taxonomy facilitates the development of mitigation strategies tailored to the specific needs of each affected group. Furthermore, the variation in media coverage of risks throughout the year reflects a dynamic shift in media priorities and concerns in response to public opinion.

Regarding the social actors involved in the public media debate about AI (RQ2), the discourse is predominantly controlled by actors with specific agendas or positions of power, including the media, regulators, and private companies. This concentration limits the inclusion of more diverse perspectives, thereby marginalising underrepresented groups, such as users, indirectly affected communities, and third-sector organisations. While the increased participation of government actors towards the end of the year reflects an effort to address regulatory concerns, the limited representation of citizens and non-governmental organisations undermines the legitimacy of the public media space as a forum for inclusive and pluralistic debate on AI.

Regarding the participation of government and regulatory actors in the debate on AI risks, the sustained growth throughout the year is significant, with a notable increase from April onwards, peaking in October and November. This increase likely reflects an intensified response to growing media and societal concerns about AI, as well as pressure to establish regulatory frameworks. The pattern suggests that government actors have taken a more active and strategic role in shaping public discourse on AI, coinciding with key legislative debates, especially in contexts such as the European Union. Their growing participation contrasts with the underrepresentation of citizen and third-sector voices, which limits diversity in shaping the debate and reinforces the centrality of institutions and authorities in this area.

In relation to the role of Spanish digital media in framing the public debate on AI risks (RQ3), the results of this research highlight how landmark events in 2023 were instrumental in influencing the media discourse surrounding AI-related risks. Milestones such as the open letters in March and May, the AI Safety Summit 2023, and the OpenAI leadership crisis served as catalysts, intensifying media coverage and prioritising certain risks over others. While existential risks, particularly those threatening humanity and civilisation, dominated discussions surrounding these high-profile events, practical risks concerning individuals and the economy remained a constant feature of the debate, reflecting concerns about privacy, disinformation, employment, and governance. These patterns demonstrate not only the capacity of specific milestones to influence the media's focus, but also their impact on public visibility, emphasising the need for balanced coverage that addresses both catastrophic risks and more immediate and tangible implications.

In summary, the findings address the three research questions as follows: (RQ1) the risks that received the most media coverage were existential risks and those affecting individuals; (RQ2) the debate was dominated by the media, regulators and technology companies, with little citizen participation; and (RQ3) the press acted as an actor that amplified certain risks in response to global events and institutional agendas, contributing to the establishment of lasting interpretative frameworks.

An analysis of media discourses on AI risks suggests that these reflect not only legitimate concerns, but also the strategic and commercial interests of tech companies. Promoting narratives that emphasise existential and abstract risks appears to divert attention from more immediate challenges, such as disinformation, the concentration of power, and the lack of adequate regulations. This approach could serve as a strategy to block the establishment of regulations that would slow short-term business growth while reinforcing the perception of AI as an uncontrollable technology, thus discouraging government intervention. In this context, it is essential to critically analyse the motivations underlying these discourses and ensure that the public debate on AI remains inclusive, transparent, and focused on the actual risks facing society today.

Finally, this study highlights the importance of considering national contexts in future comparative studies. Previous research, such as that of González-Arias and López-García (2024), underscores the significant influence of cultural differences and national frameworks on how the media communicate the risks associated with AI. Similarly, Nguyen and Hekman (2024) note that while there are commonalities in assessing AI's potential, narratives around risk and conflict differ markedly across cultural and regulatory ecosystems.

In summary, this research offers a preliminary framework for understanding how Spanish digital media have shaped their discourse on AI-related risks. It also provides valuable insights for future comparative studies and the development of strategies to promote a more inclusive, transparent, and balanced public debate.

6. Funding and Support

This study was funded and supported by:

- The R&D project Artificial Intelligence in Digital Media in Spain: Effects and Roles (PID2024-156034OB-C22), funded by MICIU/AEI/10.13039/501100011033 and by “ERDF/EU”.
- The Fondecyt Regular Project No. 1251262, Risk Construction in Artificial Intelligence Discourse in the Press: A Longitudinal and Comparative Study between Chile and Spain, funded by the Chilean National Agency for Research and Development (ANID).
- A predoctoral contract from the Xunta de Galicia held by Tania Forja-Pena (ref. ED481A-2023-043).
- A predoctoral contract from the Xunta de Galicia held by Beatriz Gutiérrez-Caneda (ref. ED481A-2022/209).

7. Authors' contribution

Conceptualization	Ideas: formulation or evolution of overarching research goals and aims.	Authors 1 and 2
Data curation	Management activities to annotate (produce metadata), scrub data and maintain research data (including software code, where it is necessary for interpreting the data itself) for initial use and later re-use.	Authors 1, 2, 3 and 4
Formal analysis	Application of statistical, mathematical, computational, or other formal techniques to analyse or synthesize study data.	Author 2
Funding acquisition	Acquisition of the financial support for the project leading to this publication.	Authors 1 and 2
Investigation	Conducting a research and investigation process, specifically performing the experiments, or data/evidence collection.	Authors 1, 2 and 3
Methodology	Development or design of methodology; creation of models.	Author 1 and 2
Project administration	Management and coordination responsibility for the research activity planning and execution.	Author 1
Resources	Provision of study materials, reagents, materials, patients, laboratory samples, animals, instrumentation, computing resources, or other analysis tools.	Authors 1 and 2
Software	Programming, software development; designing computer programs; implementation of the computer code and supporting algorithms; testing of existing code components.	Author 2
Supervision	Oversight and leadership responsibility for the research activity planning and execution, including mentorship external to the core team.	Authors 1 and 2
Validation	Verification, whether as a part of the activity or separate, of the overall replication/reproducibility of results/experiments and other research outputs.	Authors 1, 2, 3 and 4
Visualization	Preparation, creation and/or presentation of the published work, specifically visualization/data presentation.	Authors 1, 2, 3 and 4
Writing / original draft	Preparation, creation and/or presentation of the published work, specifically writing the initial draft (including substantive translation).	Authors 1, 2, 3 and 4
Writing / review & editing	Preparation, creation and/or presentation of the published work by those from the original research group, specifically critical review, commentary or revision –including pre– or post-publication stages.	Authors 1, 2, 3 and 4

8. Statement on the use of artificial intelligence

No artificial intelligence tools have been used in this article.

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