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Assembling AI: Discursive infrastructures and the UK's *National AI Strategy*

Abstract

This research explores how the UK Government's 2021 *National AI Strategy* attempts to discursively construct an infrastructure of AI. I do so by conceptualising AI as an assemblage of labour, material components, supply chains, ideologies and industries, as well as the relationships between them. This assemblage is stabilised through processes of 'infrastructuring' such as the creation of master narratives and the invisibilisation of work (Star, 1999). Thus, by combining Foucauldian discourse analysis (Foucault, 1981) with Susan Leigh Star's (1999) ethnographic tools for analysing infrastructure, I explore how the *National AI Strategy* discursively constructs and stabilises a specific assemblage of actors, ideologies, flows of capital, and relationships of power. In particular, I show how the UK Government attempts to «will to truth» (Foucault, 1981; 55) an infrastructural assemblage that stabilises a definition of AI as an autonomous and inevitable force; a technical/social dualism which privileges the technical over the social in driving innovation; the 'heroic engineer' as an individual and rational archetype; and the UK as a dominant and modernising player on the global stage of AI. However, these constructions are not just discursive; they are explicitly tied to governmental, financial and regulatory powers. These translate discursive imaginaries into practice through the funding of specific institutions, the creation of technical pedagogies of AI, and the opening of visa routes for 'globally mobile individuals'. However, the UK Government's infrastructure of AI is not constructed in isolation. It is materialised through negotiations between different actors, institutions and ideologies. Thus, I draw on Bowker's (1994) concept of 'infrastructural inversion' to explore how the geopolitical relationships, interpretative flexibility (Pinch and Bijker, 1984), invisible work and master narratives (Star, 1999) that sit 'underneath' the *National AI Strategy* shape, interact with, and displace the UK Government's infrastructure of AI.

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