



Discursive strategies to depoliticize Artificial Intelligence (AI):

A study on Google's ideational power

Master Thesis

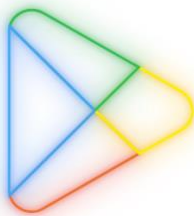
International Public Administration and Politics

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Characters: 155,765

June 2023



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ABSTRACT

Big Tech companies influence other actors in the Artificial Intelligence (AI) governance arena to adopt their views of AI development as an unstoppable force of natural evolution through discursive strategies built on ideational elements. Framing AI development as such reduces the options for political deliberation toward a consensual definition of the issue and the solutions that we should implement to address the challenges that these technologies bring. This thesis delves into the elements constituting Google's ideational power by identifying and characterizing the company's discursive strategies for depoliticizing AI development. Using qualitative content analysis of Google's Chief Executive Officer (CEO) public discourse, the thesis shows that Google's nine discursive strategies rest on "*common sense*" - *based, leader-centric, and expertise-oriented arguments* and this persuasion triad aims at Google's consolidation as a legitimate actor to facilitate depoliticization; its central axis is Google's self-representation; and shows the intertextuality of Google's discourse. Overall, this thesis contributes to the understanding of the arguments and ideational elements used in discursive battles to persuade other actors regarding AI development. It also adds to the literature on Big Tech politics, the ideational dimension of AI, and Discursive Institutionalism (DI) scholarship.

Keywords: AI development, Big Tech, depoliticization, discursive strategies, ideational power.

RESUMEN:

Big Tech influencia otros actores en el ámbito de la gobernanza de la Inteligencia Artificial (IA) para que adopten su visión del desarrollo de la IA como una fuerza imparable de evolución natural a través de estrategias discursivas basadas en elementos ideacionales. Enmarcar el desarrollo de la IA como tal reduce las opciones para la deliberación política hacia una definición consensuada del problema y las soluciones que debemos implementar para abordar los desafíos que traen estas tecnologías. Esta tesis profundiza en los elementos que constituyen el poder ideacional de Google al identificar y caracterizar las estrategias discursivas de la compañía para despolitizar el desarrollo de la IA. Usando un análisis de contenido cualitativo del discurso público del Director Ejecutivo de Google, la tesis muestra que las nueve estrategias discursivas de Google se basan en argumentos que apelan al "*sentido común*", *centrados en el líder y orientados a la experiencia*, y esta tríada de persuasión apunta a la consolidación de Google como un actor legítimo para facilitar la despolitización; está profundamente entrelazada con la representación de Google como eje central; y muestra la intertextualidad del discurso de Google. En general, esta tesis contribuye a comprender los argumentos y elementos ideacionales utilizados en las batallas discursivas para persuadir a otros actores sobre el desarrollo de la IA. También se suma a la literatura sobre la política de *Big Tech*, la dimensión ideacional de la IA y el institucionalismo discursivo (ID).

Palabras clave: *Big Tech*, desarrollo de la IA, despolitización, estrategias discursivas, poder ideacional.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION.....	4
2. LITERATURE REVIEW.....	6
POLITICS OF BIG TECH.....	7
IDEATIONAL DIMENSIONS OF AI.....	9
3. THEORETICAL APPROACH.....	12
IDEAS AND POWER.....	12
THE DEPOLITICIZING POWER OF DISCURSIVE STRATEGIES.....	15
THE APPROACH: DEPOLITICIZATION THROUGH THE USE OF DISCURSIVE STRATEGIES.....	16
4. METHODOLOGY & DATA.....	18
SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS AND DISCURSIVE STRATEGIES.....	18
SAMPLING AND CASE SELECTION.....	19
DATA COLLECTION.....	21
CODING PROCESS.....	22
DATA ANALYSIS.....	25
QUALITY CRITERIA.....	26
5. ANALYSIS.....	27
“COMMON SENSE”-BASED DISCURSIVE STRATEGIES.....	29
LEADER-CENTRIC DISCURSIVE STRATEGIES.....	34
EXPERTISE-ORIENTED DISCURSIVE STRATEGIES.....	39
6. DISCUSSION.....	45
7. CONCLUSION.....	48
8. REFERENCES.....	51
9. VIDEO INTERVIEWS (YOUTUBE).....	57

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Use of discursive strategies to depoliticize issues.....	17
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LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Coding frame.....	23
Table 2. Google's discursive strategies to depoliticize AI.....	28

1. INTRODUCTION

“Most human beings have an almost infinite capacity for taking things for granted.”

—Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*

The rapid development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has changed how people and businesses interact in the social world. These technologies are shaping our habits, beliefs, and expectations for the future, a new normal that seems to be just the beginning. Advances in machine intelligence are expected to be numerous and influence areas such as healthcare, education, transportation, and commerce (Dietterich & Horvitz, 2015), and the existence of more sophisticated methods and access to massive computational power (Cath et al., 2017) has boosted the rapid pace of AI in the recent decade, resulting in countless developments that have benefited billions of people worldwide. It ranges from the assistant that shows us the latest news update to self-driving cars, all the way to language models based on GPT-3, such as ChatGPT, which has shown unprecedented capabilities in performing a wide range of tasks. Although AI holds potential, it also represents significant social and political challenges. When misused, these technologies have proven useful in government surveillance and similar threats to privacy and democratic institutions (Manheim & Kaplan, 2019), helping to deepen asymmetrical power relations (Mohamed et al., 2020).

In order to solve the challenges that AI represents, it is essential to adopt a definition and, from there, design and implement solutions that allow citizens to be safeguarded and guarantee an inclusive and fair future. However, reaching this consensus represents a *discursive battle* (Seidl, 2020), a space where actors persuade others to adopt their ideas at the expense of their rivals' ideas (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2016). Discursive battles in AI arise from narratives and other ideational elements embedded in the institutional context, becoming the foundation of the solutions proposed by Big Tech companies and governments and the depiction of a future that depends almost entirely on AI. In this context, ideas become relevant to explore since they “can shape how we think about political problems also in the future” (Selling, 2021, p. 48), and they represent the “substantive content of discourse” (Schmidt, 2012, p. 87).

As the creators and developers of the digital world, Big Tech, the most prominent tech companies worldwide (Bacay, 2020; Ibáñez, 2021; Ulnicane et al., 2022), exert ideational power in discursive battles. That is, they “influence other actors' normative and cognitive beliefs through the use of ideational elements” (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2016, p. 321). These companies seek to persuade others about AI development's *inevitable* and *unstoppable force* as something natural, depoliticizing it, and shrinking political deliberation *fora*. The depoliticization phenomena is “the

set of processes (including varied tactics, strategies, and tools) that remove or displace the potential for choice, collective agency, and deliberation around a particular political issue.” (Hay, 2007, as cited in Fawcett et al., 2017). In other words, the mechanisms that are used to influence others in accepting AI development and its outcomes as inevitable events, where alternatives are not even debated.

Despite the growing literature on Big Tech power and AI, their ideational dimension, and a different strand of literature on depoliticization (Fawcett et al., 2017; Flinders & Wood, 2014; Hay, 2014; Wood & Flinders, 2014), this intersection has yet to be studied explicitly. By developing discursive strategies, private stakeholders with monopolistic power advance in *interpretative contests* (Willers, 2021) to depoliticize AI. In light of the foregoing, the research question driving this thesis is as follows:

What are Google’s discursive strategies for depoliticizing AI?

Through the exploration of this question, the study aims to identify and characterize the discursive strategies to depoliticize AI used by Google, the “quintessential tech company” (Rieder, 2022, p. 3), since it is one of the Big Tech companies with the widest reach and an established public position regarding AI and “occupies a central position in the development of contemporary capitalism and the strengthening of its power structures” (Smyrnaio, 2019, p. 445). This thesis draws on the literature on discursive institutionalism and employs Carstensen and Schmidt’s (2016) conceptualization of ideational power, Stiller’s (2010) ideational leadership and Louis and Maertens’ (2021) depoliticization practices to explain how ideational leaders use discursive strategies to depoliticize issues. From a constructivist philosophical standpoint, I conducted a single-method case study in which I coded and analyzed the content of 15 YouTube video interviews with Sundar Pichai, Google’s CEO, to explore the ideational elements in Google’s public discourse.

The core empirical argument of this thesis is that Google uses nine discursive strategies (See Chapter 5) relying on “common sense”-based, leader-centric, and expertise-oriented arguments to depoliticize AI, and these have the purpose of legitimizing Google and show the intertextual and context-dependent nature of its discourse. Such arguments and the characterization of discursive strategies are important because they help us understand Google’s agenda and its potential effects on our vision of the future. In addition, they allow us to explore mechanisms toward the (re)politicization of AI development to contribute, debate, and shape the future we want.

This thesis also contributes to various strands of the literature. First, it adds to the literature on the politics of Big Tech and the ideational dimension of AI by showing the specific ideational elements on which Google bases its strategies, the most relevant narratives, values, and arguments that influence the power dynamics among Google, public actors, and audiences. Second, it contributes to the literature on discursive institutionalism by characterizing discursive strategies. Although these have been previously mentioned in Discursive Institutionalism scholarship (e.g., Boswell & Hampshire, 2017), this thesis delves into the central motives of the discursive strategies created by an unexplored private actor. That is, how Google uses ideational elements to support its arguments and expand its reach. Finally, this thesis sheds light on the mechanisms that a private actor uses in a specific sector to depoliticize issues.

The study proceeds as follows. First, it reviews the literature on Big Tech politics and the ideational dimensions of AI. The second chapter elaborates on the theoretical approach built on the conceptualization of ideational power by Carstensen and Schmidt (2016) and the practices of depoliticization by Louis and Maertens (2021). Once the methodological approach is discussed (qualitative content analysis of a single case study), the findings are presented by explaining the empirical arguments and describing the ideational elements of Google's discursive strategies for depoliticizing AI in detail. The study then discusses the implications of using such strategies for people's political participation, delving into Google's self-interest in a "status quo paradox," and concludes by summarizing the thesis' main findings and contributions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

News about the potential threats of AI developments have become the "new normal." Social inequalities due to gender and racial biases, new surveillance mechanisms (Filgueiras, 2022), and exploitative labor conditions seem to be the price we must pay to achieve progress as a society. Nevertheless, is it inevitable? Why do we passively accept a future of automation and datafication in every aspect of our lives? The starting point for understanding this is to explore the origins of our beliefs and ideas about emergent technologies, such as AI.

This thesis draws on two related strands of literature to explore these and comprehend the debate regarding Big Tech's discursive strategies to depoliticize AI. On the one hand, the review explores the politics of Big Tech. The research focuses on tech giants' self-representation and impact on the social, political, and economic realms and focuses on three elements: the pre-existence of enabling structures, legitimizing narratives and ideas (e.g., technological determinism), and how those shape interests and discursive strategies. In identifying the latter, the review focuses on solutionism and claims of expertise.

On the other hand, recent scholarship has delved into the ideational dimensions of AI. The literature in this subsection shows the existence of discursive battles, the impact of ideas on how we embrace AI development (e.g., the discourse of enchanted determinism), or how we accept opaque systems by virtue of the “epistemic abilities” of those behind these algorithms (Danaher, 2016). Likewise, the review contemplates National AI Strategies (NASs) as tools created by governments through ideational framing-based strategies to counterbalance Big Tech’s discursive strategies to move the debate to more private *loci*, with what these companies consolidate their power to define and lead AI.

Politics of Big Tech

Why does Big Tech matter to our social lives and as political actors? The literature suggests that these companies have become "obligatory passage points for social exchange" (Hendrikse et al., 2022, p. 59), "semi-public sectors" (Seidl & Nachtwey, 2020, p. 36), and "agents who alter social relations" (Monsees et al., 2023, p. 2) through their progressive control and operation of different monopolies and the colonization of professional and private dimensions of our lives (Hendrikse et al., 2022). Their business model, based on control rather than ownership (ibid.), has given them sufficient discretion to decide unilaterally on different matters, leading to concerns about power and information asymmetries (Ghosh & Srinivasan, 2021).

Three elements stand out in the depiction of Big Tech politics. The first is the existence of macrostructures in which these companies expand their power and influence. For instance, platforms, as the “organizational form of digital capitalism” (Seidl, 2021, p. 12), strengthen the power of Big Tech (Birch & Bronson, 2022). Recent studies on platformization elaborate on Big Tech’s characteristics as digital platforms, such as their shape-shifting nature since “they are at once product companies, service companies, and infrastructure companies; players in the market and markets of the marketplace; private platforms and public spheres” (Atal, 2021, p. 336), and have a “deeply centralized model of power” (ibid., p. 337).

Second, narratives and ideas support their existence and actions. Technological determinist ideas, such as those arguing that "social problems are the result of inefficiencies and deficiencies that can be eliminated with the right technology” (Slee, 2016, as cited in Seidl & Nachtwey, 2020, p. 12) or the rhetorical impact of the shape-shifting nature of Big Tech (Atal, 2021), show how their domination in emergent technologies lies in the naturalization of concepts and roles; therefore, what consumers want is dictated by Big Tech's narratives, while their goals go beyond delivering good services. These findings are expressed in the work of Seidl (2021), who discusses the political nature of digitalization and recognizes that ideas do not "become 'effective

forces in history' by themselves, but through interested actors that use them as weapons in discursive battles" (p. 211).

Third, ideas are essential for comprehending technologies and what is best for society in that domain. Therefore, ideas shape discursive strategies, and Big Tech uses them to depoliticize issues, thus maintaining their monopolistic power. A recent strand of literature has been particularly appropriate for addressing the intersection of power, emergent technologies, ideas, and their materialization through discursive strategies. For instance, Obendiek and Seidl (2023) shed light on the ideational influence of digital security private companies on public actors and their reliance on these companies' competence and options to control their actions to guarantee that they are acting in the public interest.

The authors call this influence "ideational business power," exerted through solutionist strategies "that depict security problems as technological problems and posit a compatibility between the economic interests of private actors and the broader political or normative interests of public actors" (p. 3). In other words, the core element of this strategy is to show to other actors that tech companies' competencies and knowledge are necessary to tackle a problem whose solution relies on technology since "as political weapons, ideas identify the cause of a problem and a solution to it" (Blyth, 2011 as cited in Selling, 2021, p. 51).

In the same vein, Seidl and Nachtwey (2020) argue that, as the core of the spirit of digital capitalism, solutionism is how tech companies self-represent themselves. Innovators who want to change the conditions of the world for good, "a natural alignment between business opportunities and social problems" (p. 14). The power of solutionism as a discursive strategy relies on how it defines the image of tech elites in the minds of policymakers and societies, thereby positively impacting their legitimacy and reputation. Similarly, it affects agenda-setting (Seidl & Nachtwey, 2020).

Another example, reflecting the power of solutionist arguments, was developed by Seidl's (2020) analysis on the regulation of Uber in the city of New York. Their successful narrative of presenting themselves as heroes helping people transport and have a job gave them the support needed to make New York's Mayor de Blasio drop a bill that would impose a cap on Uber in 2015. However, as the study demonstrated, de Blasio was successful in a second attempt in 2018 because narratives and discursive strategies are among the many components to succeed in "framing contests" (Boin et al., 2009, as cited in Seidl, 2020). The author claims that it is essential to acknowledge the interplay between coalitions, narratives, and platform power to understand the politics of platform capitalism.

From a different perspective, some scholars have focused on expertise, conceived, on the one hand, as a source of legitimacy, where the role of private actors depends on their epistemic authority (Kruck & Weiss, 2023, as cited in Obendiek & Seidl, 2023), which is ideationally constructed and therefore not limited to an “objective level of technical competence” (ibid., p. 19).

On the other hand, claims of expertise can be considered as discursive strategies. As stated by Li & Qi (2022), “platform companies often manage their identity or narrative as a representation of technical rationality and high efficiency (...)”. (p. 8). Big Tech’s legitimizing expertise was also highlighted in Burrell and Fourcade (2021). The authors showed that “claims of technical and economic efficiency, as well as fairness, are an important component of the coding elite’s societal power” (p. 215). Similarly, Reed (1996) identified the emergence of a *new technocratic elite*. This elite is reflected in Tech CEOs and AI experts, and has the power to influence decision-making agendas and their outcomes (ibid.), portraying “the politics of expertise” (ibid., p. 573).

Willers (2021) explored the definitional power and organization in the nascent field of cyber risks through four case studies. He found the justification for experts to claim authoritative expertise in the technical and uncertain character of cyber risks. Risk representations are socially constructed “in a nexus of expert authority and interdependence” (p. 23), where these experts are vital to defining and responding to cyber risks. For instance, the first case explores “how authority structures are discursively constructed and maintained through framing contests” (ibid., p. 35). In his fourth case, the author mentioned the lack of alternatives for states concerning the provision of digital surveillance (ibid.) which allowed private actors to gain authority (Willers, 2021), where authority is a byproduct of expertise.

Comparably, although in the field of global tax battles, Seabrooke & Wigan (2016) characterized experts as having “knowledge about the issues at hand and also the capacity to network among regulators, practitioners, and activists” (ibid., p. 358), an ability identified by the researchers as *powering ideas through expertise*. As discursive strategies, ideas powered through expertise can “contest the established order” (p. 357) and change the debate when merged with claims of moral authority because expertise is about how things work (knowledge) and also about *how things should be* (Seabrooke & Wigan, 2016).

Ideational dimensions of AI

Through the significant investments of Big Tech companies, “coupled with the societal value attributed to technological solutions, AI is increasingly being used to organize data, predict outcomes, and manage social worlds” (Joyce et al., 2021, p. 1). These functions have helped Big Tech to increase their reach and influence. Their “concentration of control over AI development”

(Dignam, 2020) and deployment “at an international scale” (Campolo & Crawford, 2020) have led AI to be placed at the center of the public debate in a shared understanding of its impact on the political realm. AI disrupts “political dynamics in elections, political communication, and public policy dimensions” (Filgueiras, 2022, p. 449), can deepen prevailing inequalities (Joyce et al., 2021), and creates material conditions that are not underlined in the discussions around the AI race (Moore, 2020).

The ideational dimension of AI entails discursive battles between a wide variety of public and private actors. Although we treat machines as decision-makers (ibid.), thus, freeing companies from political responsibility for the negative impacts of AI development, the priorities of these machines are politically oriented (Filgueiras, 2022). What we seem to forget is that “human decision making occurs at every step of the coding process” (Joyce et al., 2021, p. 4), and AI design and deployment “depend on objectives shaped by political and institutional dimensions” (Filgueiras, 2022, p. 458).

In the emerging literature on AI, one strand of research focuses on the impact of ideas and narratives on how we perceive the development of AI. For instance, Campolo and Crawford (2020) explain how the discourse of *enchanted determinism*¹ has “social and political effects, often serving the interests of their powerful creators” (p. 9). The authors find a causal relationship between these discourses and the displacement of technical realities and biases together with “the political processes of social categorization” (Campolo & Crawford, 2020, p. 11) that underlie these systems (ibid.). Furthermore, they argue that the power of deep learning systems (an application of AI) becomes deterministic when deployed in social areas such as healthcare or the criminal justice system, creating more hierarchies “outside of political or civic processes, with consequences that even their designers may not fully understand or control” (Campolo & Crawford, 2020, p. 3). In other words, the democratic recourse of political contestation is threatened (ibid.) by said determinism.

In the same spirit, Danaher (2016) raises the issue of how opaque *algocratic systems* undermine people’s participation in political procedures. The reliance on algorithms comes from legitimizing actors with “better epistemic abilities.” As the author explains, “one could imagine people favouring the implementation of such systems for epistemic reasons” (p. 10). This shows that in a system governed by algorithms, justifying power in expertise threatens participation in public decision-making.

¹ According to the authors, it is a “discourse that presents deep learning techniques as magical, outside the scope of present scientific knowledge, yet also deterministic, in that deep learning systems can nonetheless detect patterns that give unprecedented access to people’s identities, emotions, and social character” (Campolo & Crawford, 2020, p. 3).

Scholarship has also begun to examine the importance of imaginaries in AI and discursive strategies, specifically through an analysis of national AI strategies (NASs). Although in the design of NASs the central actors are the states, the narratives are shared, as well as the solutionist ideas. Bareis and Katzenbach's (2022) study of key players' national AI strategies shows that AI's political rhetoric is "constitutive as it frames discourses and (im)possibilities" (p. 871). Thus, what is *thought* impacts what is *done*, and what is *done* strengthens those ideational explanations inserting them into the collective unconscious as "natural."

In the documents, the *inevitability* of AI is explained in solutionist terms "through the motive of technological determinism, but equally through the pressure of international competitiveness, harnessed within a discourse of capitalist and geopolitical striving for strategic advantage." (Bareis & Katzenbach, 2022, p. 867). In the words of Roberge et al. (2020), "the end results of such developments are unavoidably political and normative" (p. 5). Normative, since almost no one questions the implementation of AI. AI is because *that is how things should be*, and framing-based strategies are powerful as they define how the world is and *should be*.

As an example, Paltieli (2022) shows that the National AI Strategies (NASs) under his consideration, frame, for instance, "data-sharing into a potential political virtue" (p. 1614), and define "a new relationship between citizens and governments" (ibid.) by "offering a political imaginary that is both human-centric and oriented towards the common good" (p. 1618). Here, the imaginaries are the discursive strategies, and the author identifies three dimensions in the NASs: "democratic imaginaries that draft an ideal image of democracy; second, sociotechnical imaginaries explain how AI technology can be used to achieve such democracy in a way that corresponds to shared national history and culture; third, data imaginaries shape the expectations from data processing itself" (Paltieli, 2022, p. 1616). Although these strategies are conceived based on similar arguments to Big Tech's, NASs are described by the literature as tools to "become a counterforce to these data monopolies, and in some cases even an alternative" (Paltieli, 2022, p. 1615).

In a different light, af Malmberg & Trondal (2021) discussed the ideational framing-based strategies used by the EU Commission to push for a coordinated European AI policy within Nordic countries. In its role as a policy entrepreneur, the Commission framed "the AI issue in such a way that incites member states to adopt [it]" (ibid., p. 4). By framing AI as a policy issue that will transform our present and future, they have encouraged AI policy discourse in the Nordic political *fora*, which in turn has resulted in the design of AI strategies that are conceptually harmonized with the purposes of the EU (af Malmberg & Trondal, 2021) as a supranational actor.

In sum, the literature shares arguments about the impact of ideational explanations for Big Tech's power and AI development, as well as the effects of these explanations on the transference of the political debate to other *loci* (i.e., depoliticization). However, there is a gap in the literature regarding the conformation of discursive strategies based on the explored ideational elements. Although it is possible to claim that Big Tech and other actors use discursive strategies, the scholarship is limited to insinuating their existence by identifying the "naturalization" of narratives instead of addressing theories and methodologies to show the elements that comprise these discursive strategies. This study aims to contribute to closing these gaps through a theoretical approach with discursive institutionalist foundations that contemplates depoliticization as an act and consequence amidst discursive battles.

3. THEORETICAL APPROACH

Ideas and power

In order to find out Big Tech's discursive strategies with depoliticizing effects in AI, the theoretical approach delves into ideas and their power since ideas compose, shape, and legitimize these strategies. Ideas, in relation to power, are political weapons (Blyth, 2003; Carstensen, 2010) used in "discursive battles" (Seidl, 2021, p. 211) in the political realm, where the original creators of an idea and rival actors fight to maintain or challenge its meaning (Carstensen, 2010). Therefore, *Ideas* in this thesis are defined as "historically constructed beliefs and perceptions of both individual and collective actors" (Béland, 2019, p. 4), a relevant emphasis for the thesis as it explored how a concrete actor shaped the discursive strategies described in the findings.

Discursive Institutionalism (DI) as a discipline is "concerned with both the substantive content of ideas and the interactive processes of discourse in institutional context" (Schmidt, 2010b, p. 1). Being that "ideas are discursively developed" (Schmidt, 2017, p. 253), discourse matters because it allows one to explain the transit of an idea from the individual level to collective action (Schmidt, 2010b). When DI incorporates discourse as a fundamental element in explaining the power of ideas, it does so to the extent that it also considers "the interactive discursive processes by and through which agents generate and communicate ideas" (Schmidt, 2017, p. 250). The interactive function of discourse is at the heart of the discursive concept of power because perception and signification are embedded in it, and as a result, certain subjects are created or shaped, hegemonic assumptions are reinforced, and/or a particular set of social or ethical objects is naturalized (I. A. Reed, 2013). For example, Big Tech's ability to present AI development as the *right thing to do* has naturalized it because it is perceived as good for economic growth and innovation.

Over the last few decades, DI scholarship has shown that ideas are powerful. The power of ideas is one of the most relevant concerns when analyzing an issue from an ideational perspective, given that ideas define the interests of actors involved in the policymaking process (Béland et al., 2016) and help understand the nature and exercise of power in relation to an institutional context. Being intersubjective (Blyth, 2003), these are shared, interpreted, and reinterpreted by actors fighting on the discursive battlefield. Through these processes, ideas can influence policy outcomes (Béland & Cox, 2016), as the definition of interests represents the first stage of the decision-making process. The actors' interests will determine problem definitions or "programmatic ideas" and specific solutions to the problems defined previously or "policy ideas." These, in turn, are embedded in a "fundamental set of ideas" or "public philosophies" (Boswell & Hampshire, 2017). Ideas shape institutions (Parsons, 2016), and actors' actions (Mehta, 2010), which are not "reducible to some other non-ideational force" (ibid., p. 24).

Once the discipline reached a tacit agreement on the power of ideas, DI scholars began questioning *how* ideas influence what is *done* in the political realm, such as supporting and implementing certain narratives and policies. The theoretical starting point of this thesis is based on Carstensen and Schmidt's (2016) conceptualization of ideational power, which helps us understand how ideas are powerful in the particular context of AI development. The authors define ideational power as "the capacity of actors (whether individual or collective) to influence other actors' normative and cognitive beliefs through the use of ideational elements" (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2016, p. 321). This means actors are able to influence others' beliefs and ideas through persuasive methods, imposing their ideas or influencing the context in which alternatives exist, either through speech, narratives, stories, or other ideational elements at their disposal. This influence means that ideas from other actors are discarded (ibid.) and the relevance (cognitive) and resonance with societal values (normative) of the ideas of actors exerting ideational power will prevail. Therefore, winners in discursive battles have the power to impose their interpretation of the world, how we understand its problems, and how to solve them.

Moreover, ideational power comprises three distinctive elements. First, it is characterized by a conception of power that is formed by constructing intersubjective meaning structures that actors use to make sense of their circumstances and argue over which ideas and discourses will be considered viable (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2016). Second, it is "a top-down and bottom-up process" (ibid., p. 322), including the voices of all actors, despite hierarchies in the policy process. Third, it focuses on how actors persuade other actors' normative and cognitive beliefs; therefore, it is agent-oriented (ibid.).

To exert ideational power, actors must persuade others to support their ideas through cognitive and normative arguments. However, persuasiveness is found in three different types: power *through*, *over* and *in* ideas. Power *through* ideas is defined by the authors as power focused on persuasion through the use of ideational elements. Here, actors convince others with cognitive and normative arguments, instead of forcing them or using other power resources (e.g., material). For instance, Big Tech companies persuade governments, International Organizations (IOs), and the public of the value of their views, appealing to how much we need certain development (cognitive terms) to guarantee innovation and economic growth (normative terms).

Power *over* ideas is exerted when an actor “controls and dominates the meaning of ideas” (ibid, p. 326), controlling how those are circulated. An example is how Big Tech’s persuasiveness has made governmental actors and societies accept their views through the discourse that these companies reproduce on their own platforms, guaranteeing their discursive dominance in the digital space. Finally, power *in* ideas is the power of actors to structure thought within ideational and institutional structures at a deeper level, namely “systems of knowledge, discursive practices, and institutional setups” (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2016, p. 329). This type is evidenced by how Big Tech views end up structuring how we define and think about technological development and the future that we expect as a society.

Although this contribution is embedded in the three types, it focuses on power *through* ideas, described by Carstensen and Schmidt (2016) as the “capacity of actors to persuade other actors to accept and adopt their views of what to think and do through the use of ideational elements” (p. 323). That being so, the exercise of ideational power *through* ideas employs discursive strategies to persuade in the “battles of interpretation” (Willers, 2021, p. 4).

Furthermore, this thesis focuses on power through ideas evidenced in a particular actor’s ideational leadership (IL). Ideational leadership is “leadership with the help of ideas” (Stiller, 2010, p. 17). Building upon Stiller’s (2010) definition, tech leaders will use ideational strategies with the purpose of ideational change or to maintain the meanings that inform policy decisions in the context of AI governance. Given the particular position of tech leadership as private actors, these leaders diffuse solutions through their discourses while preserving the self-representation of non-partisan and neutral, and legitimize those solutions with cognitive and normative arguments.

In this context, an ideational leader represents the interests of shareholders and embodies corporate values and culture. Drawing on the conceptualizations of the author, one could argue that ideational leaders will use discursive strategies to 1) promote their products and services to solve societal challenges since other solutions have not been effective in the past or are framed as

such, 2) legitimize new policy solutions that depend on said products and services, and 3) frame resistance as potentially harmful because it will affect societal interests (Stiller, 2010).

The existence of discursive strategies is manifested in the discipline's literature, corroborating, for instance, how "tech companies will often advance both cognitive and normative arguments through solutionist ideas" (Obendiek & Seidl, 2023, p. 8). Employing DI fundamental concepts, this study proposes a definition of discursive strategies as the *set of practices used in a discursive battle to influence actors toward the dominance of specific ideas*. Nevertheless, there are infinite reasons to fight discursive battles. One of these, and the heart of the problem definition in this thesis, is the use of discursive strategies to depoliticize an issue.

The depoliticizing power of discursive strategies

As persuasive tools in discursive battles, discursive strategies lead to the reallocation of responsibilities, the definition of priorities, and make a particular matter visible, or, as this document argues, make it taken for granted. A discursive strategy that *depoliticizes an issue* restrains democratic options to deal with it, as could happen with the potential negative outcomes of AI development. Even though there is no consensus on the definition of depoliticization, it is described as "the narrowing of the boundaries of democratic politics" (Flinders & Wood, 2014, p. 135). However, the tightening of democratic political boundaries does not equate with the absence of politics. Instead, these events are occurring elsewhere (Hay, 2014). Through the use of discursive strategies, the issue is transferred to a different scenario.

In the same way that the intentional or strategic component of depoliticization depends on the situation (Louis & Maertens, 2021), the selection of elements to be depoliticized will depend on the actors and their objectives in defining the issue. For example, tech companies use their resources to mobilize consumers in favor of flexible regulation to make their operations possible, as in the case of Uber (Seidl, 2020), therefore politicizing this problem. However, other elements of the debate, such as the *inevitability* of job automation, are decided "behind closed doors" and appear logical on the path to technological progress.

The mentioned scenario reveals the discursive dimension of depoliticization, or "the 'speech acts' of individuals in the private and public arena that make certain issues appear to be 'normal' or 'natural'" (Wood & Flinders, 2014, p. 152). The naturalization of a matter is embedded in denial because a single interpretation closes the possibilities of finding alternatives from the outset (ibid.). Louis and Maertens (2021) refer to this denial as an outcome of depoliticization practices, understood as patterns of action with social meaning and able to "deny or conceal contingency, choice and deliberation" (p. 13). As no theoretical developments directly answer the

question of the depoliticizing effects of Big Tech's discursive strategies, the author draws on and integrates the categorization of some depoliticization practices in the field of IOs to build a theoretical approach. This integration contributes to creating a bridge between the power of ideational explanation and depoliticization processes.

The approach: Depoliticization through the use of discursive strategies

Ideational power enables actors to use specific discursive strategies and, when implemented in a discursive battle, reinforces the actors' ideational power, legitimizing their position. This process is embedded in an institutional context, characterized as "structures that constrain actors and as constructs created and changed by those actors" (Schmidt, 2008, p. 314). Understanding the sources of these discursive strategies facilitates a better characterization of the ideational power exerted by an ideational leader.

For this purpose, this study adopts three types of discursive strategies to depoliticize: "common sense"-based, leader-centric and expertise-oriented, drawing on Louis and Maertens' (2021) depoliticization practices and the interest of this thesis in Google's CEO as an ideational leader (IL). First, depoliticization is institutionalized through arguments framed as "common sense" or "natural." The naturalization of an issue lies on how related it is to societal values and mainstream discourses, and actors use "*common sense*"-based discursive strategies to gather support because it is easier to influence other actor's beliefs through ideas framed as unquestionable or "logical." For instance, the idea that technological developments can solve most societal problems, an argument that has become commonplace for the tech sector and has resonated with the public sector.

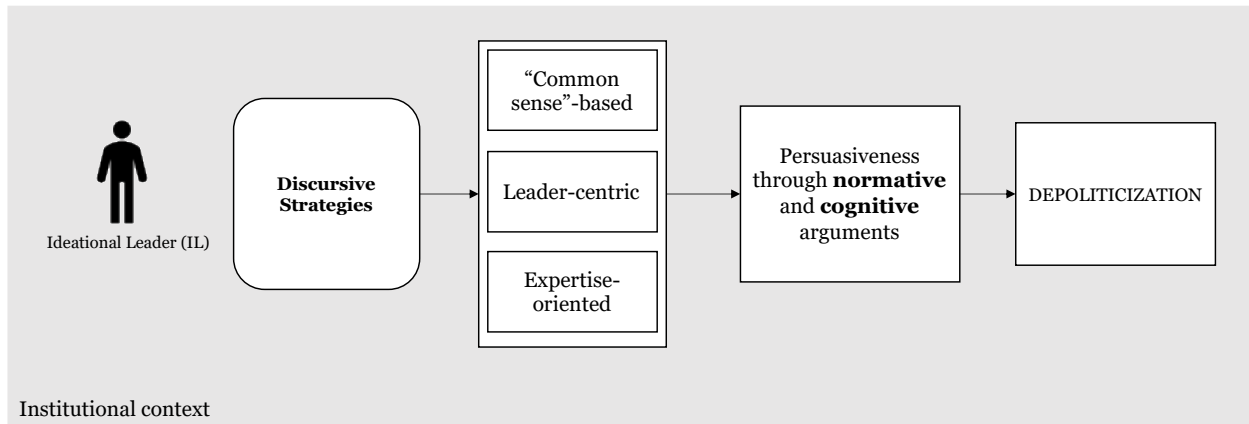
Second, and based on the concept of ideational leadership, *leader-centric discursive strategies* are built on ideational elements regarding the leader's life and traits: stories and personal qualities that coexist and impulse the depoliticizing narratives from other types. Third, expertise-oriented discursive strategies, based on specialized knowledge as a reason for legitimate action. In the case of Big Tech and AI experts, their knowledge is highly technical, allowing these profiles to give opinions on complex issues with the authority of their profession and experience. Expertise can be both the core value of a discursive strategy and the reason to fight in the discursive battlefields, "that is, [the] conflicts over the exclusionary jurisdictional domains arising out of the contested monopolization of abstract knowledge and technique" (M. I. Reed, 1996, p. 582).

Furthermore, the persuasiveness of discursive strategies is based on normative or cognitive arguments used by the ideational leader. On the one hand, normative arguments appeal

to “mass intuitions” (Widmaier et al., 2007, as cited in Carstensen & Schmidt, 2016; Schmidt, 2008). Thus, a normative argument defines the appropriateness of an idea based on certain shared principles. The persuasiveness of this type of argument will be “dependent upon the extent to which they are able to demonstrate its appropriateness in terms of the values of a given community” (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2016, p. 324). In other words, normative arguments are considered relevant depending on how much they resonate with ideas, values, and norms in a social setting.

On the other hand, discursive strategies can be developed based on cognitive arguments. The logic behind these arguments appeals to how much we need the idea/solution in question. For this purpose, cognitive-oriented discursive strategies must demonstrate arguments of “relevance, applicability, coherence, and greater problem-solving capacity” (Schmidt, 2002, p. 218). That is, a cognitive focus determines an issue and the options we have to solve it (Schmidt, 2008), in contrast to a normative focus, which indicates whether something is good or bad in relation to what should be done. Figure 1 summarizes the theoretical approach described above.

Figure 1. Use of discursive strategies to depoliticize issues



Source: Author’s elaboration drawing on conceptualizations from Carstensen & Schmidt (2016), Louis & Maertens (2021), Schmidt (2002, 2008), and Stiller (2010)

Considering its agent-oriented nature, ideational power exerted through discursive strategies shows how actors use ideas to affect others’ preconceptions to benefit their interests (Carstensen, 2010). Discursive strategies are the method of winning the battle, whereas ideational change or stability is the award for the winner.

4. METHODOLOGY & DATA

In the previous section, the thesis delved into *ideational power* as a core concept in the theoretical approach to creating and using discursive strategies. This section describes the methodological choices needed to answer the research question. The section is structured as follows. First, it justifies the relevance of the thesis' constructivist philosophical stance. Second, it describes the processes of sampling and case selection, explaining the choice of Google's discursive strategies as critical case sampling (Patton, 1990). Third, it delves into the data collection process, which involves a corpus of 15 video interviews searched on YouTube. Fourth, it explains the coding process based on abductive inference. Fifth, it shows how the data analysis was conducted through content analysis. This section concludes with reflections on the quality criteria and how the study addresses issues of validity and reliability.

Social constructions and discursive strategies

The existence of discursive strategies to influence actors' perceptions shows the relevance of the interpretations that result from the interaction between them. What we define as important or real is influenced by the ideas and worldviews of other actors, shaping the institutional context in which they persuade and are persuaded. Constructivism argues that "humans use language to define situations and then act according to those definitions" (Ayukawa, 2020, p. 2), and discursive strategies are found in using language to exert ideational power. Hence, it is necessary to adopt a constructivist standpoint to answer the research question of this thesis because this enables the author to delve into what the actors manifest to exercise ideational power and comprehend meanings, interpretations, and definitions shaping the current sociopolitical circumstances (ibid.).

Since "social phenomena are constructed through human interaction" (Ayukawa, 2020, p.2), the discursive strategies used in Google's discourse become a tool for maintaining meanings or generating ideational change according to Google's interest as an ideational leader. This implies that the interactive dimension of discourse is where Google, as a Big Tech actor, builds meanings and interpretations of AI development and its implications, and discursive strategies are one of its resources to construct and deconstruct phenomena through background ideational and foreground discursive abilities (Schmidt, 2012). Big Tech companies, such as Google, act and understand the world within a given context while communicating with and persuading other actors in the AI governance realm to move the debate to less-participative scenarios through discourse.

On that account, the methodological choices in this thesis explore these interpretations and social constructions to find Google's discursive strategies to depoliticize AI. First, the thesis is a qualitative study with an inductive theoretical drive (Morse & Niehaus, 2009) and abductive elements because the analysis involved working back and forth between the theoretical approach and the data to adequately define the categories of discursive strategies for depoliticization. Consequently, it aims to explore and describe ideas reflected in Google's public discourse instead of testing and demonstrating their causal effects, which is an objective in some DI research (See Jacobs, 2014).

Second, the text of Google's discourse is the central element of the analysis, as texts enclose the social constructions through which actors shape their reality, and critically reading them reveals actors' agendas and strategic positions. This means that a constructivist standpoint sets the stage for a critical perspective regarding the depoliticization of AI because it "scrutinizes what people believe to be truths or objective phenomena" (Ayukawa, 2000, p. 2). What an actor understands as something "normal" or a product of "common sense" is, in the end, a constructed interpretation that results from human interaction (ibid.) and can be found in the text of discourse.

For instance, some of what Big Tech would label as "objective conditions" regarding AI are a product of these interactions and definitions. The recognition of the depoliticization of AI as "normal" is based on arguments appealing to "common sense", leader-centric traits, and claims of expertise. Ideas sustained in normative and cognitive arguments influence actors to support Big Tech ideational leaders' positions and worldviews, and not because the existing state of affairs is "determined by the nature of things" (Kukla, 2000, p. 1). Lastly, the study focuses on particular actors, events, and contexts (Gerring, 2017). Google is a Big Tech actor with differential features (corporative values, culture, engagement, and reach) inserted into a context shaped by specific ideas and imaginaries regarding AI development. By focusing on the discursive strategies used by Google as an ideational leader, this thesis shows how one of the most relevant IT companies in the world exercises power *through* ideas and also reveals the social constructs on which Google is based to advance in the discursive battle.

Sampling and case selection

This study followed a purposive case selection of Google's discourse to explore Big Tech's creation of discursive strategies to depoliticize AI. Since Google is recognized as a "colonizer of flows of information" (Hendrikse et al., 2022, p. 63) and *the* online search monopolist (Verdegem, 2022), it constitutes an information-rich case (Patton, 1990), that is, a case "from which one can learn a

great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research” (ibid., p. 169). Its specific characteristics, such as Google’s unique culture (Tran, 2017) and the different shapes of its self-representation (Atal, 2021), allow the exploration of ideational elements used in a broad spectrum of topics, thus facilitating the extensive characterization of discursive strategies for depoliticizing AI.

Although Google portrays an example of Big Tech’s reach and success and it shares their logics and resources, for instance, “the scale size to engender certain outcomes like network effects and the integrative capacity to constitute and control a broader ecosystem of social actors, devices, legal mechanisms, etc.” (Birch & Bronson, 2022, p. 10), it represents a critical case, an important one due to particularities that allow logical generalizations (Patton, 1990). Google is specifically important as part of Big Tech because, unlike other companies, it is involved in most aspects of everyday life and has defined what is predominant on the Internet, thereby shaping the digital space (Zook & Graham, 2007). Likewise, Google allows logical generalizations, given what its role and public image mean for other Big Tech actors.

Google is depicted as a neutral and collaborative actor (Medeiros, 2022) that has actively participated in the public debate on AI governance, and has pioneered the creation of guidelines and recommendations, exerting ideational leadership in the communicative and coordinative spheres of discourse (Schmidt, 2002, 2010a). These two elements make it very likely that other Big Tech companies will adopt Google’s discursive strategies. However, as a purposive case selection, focusing on Google could limit drawing conclusions about other Big Tech companies because Google was selected on specific characteristics that could not be shared with other actors in the same population. For the same reason, it could be challenging to replicate the results with a different sample, as the criteria to select the case were based on Google’s specific context.

Furthermore, focusing on Google’s public discourse represents additional limitations. The analysis does not incorporate the discursive strategies that might exist in the private sphere of discourse, where there is a direct relationship between actors behind closed doors and negotiations between Google and governments through lobbyists, private meetings, and emails. All of these instances could show new discursive strategies that influence the perception of specific actors, usually those with a strategic position in decision-making (e.g., congress members).

Since Google’s discourse relies on private and direct communication with stakeholders, information that is difficult to gather or access, it is also not possible to present meaningful comparisons between the two spheres and draw broader conclusions. In other words, the scope and available sources constrained the thesis to focus on a specific dimension of Google’s discourse. Likewise, time constraints did not allow the inclusion of other actors’ discursive strategies (e.g.,

previous CEOs and other top executives at Google) to contribute to the depth and breadth of the analysis.

Concerning the most accurate way to identify Google's depoliticizing discursive strategies, the thesis explored the ideas of its ideational leader, the individual using idea-based strategies (Stiller, 2010), to define AI development and create ideational change where needed. Through Google's CEO ideas, it is possible to characterize Google's overall public discourse. Considering that "case studies are in-depth, detailed, and particular, and aimed to understand as much as possible" (Tight, 2022, p. 9), focusing on Google's CEO Sundar Pichai, reveals his voice as Google's voice because of his role as a communicator and representative of Google's values and vision. His opinions and public claims reflect Google's interests and agenda and reveal discursive strategies for depoliticizing AI.

As a CEO, Sundar Pichai plays a dominant role in the communicative arena. His discourse impacts Google's power, which "cannot be reduced to the technical properties of the objects it creates." (Monsees et al., 2023). Sundar Pichai's public discourse reflects Google's imaginaries, interests, and expectations and that is why for the purposes of this study "Google's discourse" and "Sundar's discourse" are used interchangeably. Nevertheless, the author acknowledges that there is a limitation when the thesis focuses on Google's CEO. As an individual, he understands and frames issues in a particular manner in relation to other top executives at Google, which means that he could have a bias toward Google because of what it means for his personal experience. This could have impacted the resulting logical generalizations about Google and the specific discursive strategies for depoliticization identified in his discourse.

Data collection

The corpus consisted of 15 video interviews in which Google's CEO, Sundar Pichai, had conversations with diverse actors. Journalists from broadcast television networks, news anchors, experts in the field participating in tech events, and hosts of annual meetings such as Davos' World Economic Forum (WEF) and tech YouTubers. (See Appendix A for the list of interviews). The interviews were searched on the YouTube platform in February 2023 using the keywords "Google CEO" AND "interview" and "Sundar Pichai" AND "interview." The selection of interviews was based on the interest in finding Google's discursive strategies in the interaction with others and considering the CEO's key role in the company's image and the dissemination of ideas in public discourse. Short edited videos and videos without interactions (e.g., speeches and presentations of products) were excluded.

The video interviews were selected based on the following criteria. First, the timeframe was determined by Sundar Pichai's period as Google's CEO (2015 to the present). Second, the AI ecosystem needed to be on the agenda. Third, the interview had to occur in a recognized *forum* and/or be relevant because of the context in which it took place. Google CEO Sundar Pichai's interviews were transcribed using an AI/ML-powered speech-to-text transcription tool. Once the transcript was finalized, the author edited the text according to contextual elements that could not be captured with the tool (e.g., relevant pauses indicating a specific reaction), in addition to fixing inaccuracies. Each interview was watched and studied at least three times for immersion in the context.

The data collection method allowed me to capture Sundar Pichai's ideas in different interactive contexts during the timeframe, an advantage that would not have been possible with other data such as corporate documents and guidelines. Similarly, the nature of the data helped identify Sundar Pichai's characteristics in the development of discursive strategies for depoliticization. Nevertheless, the use of these video interviews has some disadvantages. These conversations occurred in controlled environments, where Google's CEO and his team very likely had the chance to prepare his answers beforehand, with some exceptions where people in the audience made questions.

In addition, the motives behind each interview were unknown. Media interviews influence public perception, sometimes helping actors in self-promotional endeavors and guiding questions so that the interviewee's narrative seems neutral or *unquestionable*, which in turn helps the actors' agenda and reinforces the dominant narrative. Regarding the format, there is a limitation when trying to capture non-verbal information. While elements such as pauses, laughter, or other expressions were included in the transcripts, converting visual representations to text was not considered because the thesis focused on what Sundar Pichai *said* and the ideational elements he used to describe AI development.

Coding process

Data coding was performed using NVivo 12. Conceptualizations were generated using broad, predefined codes while considering data-driven information to build codes. Using qualitative software allowed me to create and sort categories based on interview transcripts. The identification of the main categories (Drisko & Maschi, 2015) was based on the conceptualizations drawn from the theoretical approach. The category "discursive strategies" was identified and disaggregated, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Coding frame

Elements	Description
Conceptualization	What are Google’s discursive strategies for depoliticizing AI?
Definition	<u>Discursive strategies</u> are defined as a “set of practices used in a discursive battle to influence actors toward the domination of specific ideas” and <u>practices of depoliticization</u> are understood as “socially meaningful patterns of action which deny or conceal contingency, choice and deliberation” (Louis & Maertens, 2021, p. 13).
What indicated the presence of the concepts?	<p>Statements in video interviews about AI, AI and technological development, regulation and processes involved, self-representation, and/or framing of the future.</p> <p>Subsequently, they are classified into three subcategories or types of discursive strategies for depoliticization:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. “Common sense”-based b. Leader-centric c. Expertise-oriented
When was coded?	<p>When Google’s CEO:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Produced a discourse based on general conclusions or simplifications, appealed to universal values or made reference to elements from other established discourses that could be considered legitimate (E.g., democratic values, global governance actions) b. Provided arguments justified in personal traits, stories, or his specific worldview/core values as a person. c. Claimed expertise or provided technical interpretation of societal problems.

Source: Author’s elaboration based on analytical concepts from Louis and Maertens (2021)

The coding frame was used as follows. First, the author focused on information that matched the definition of discursive strategies in relation to established topics (AI, AI and technological development, regulation and processes involved, self-representation, and/or framing of the future). That is, all the statements with a potential interest in influencing the interviewer/audiences view regarding one of these issues. The author then focused on those with depoliticizing effects, understood as claims legitimizing Google’s dominance in AI, as this reduces the space for the political participation of other actors. Once the arguments were identified, they were classified according to three subcategories built on the elements of the theoretical approach:

“common sense”-based, leader-centric, and expertise-oriented. The example shows how the units were coded:

“You know, done correctly, you know, in many ways, it's going to be helpful to you. You take it for granted (emphasis added). The same way today. For example, in India, over 1/3 of the queries on many phones come through voice. That is something people take for granted; you can do it. So, over time you will expect to speak and be able to understand any language on... in the world (emphasis added). [Omitted text]. You may go to a doctor's office and go through a scan, and the system may be prioritizing for the radiologist, so that they don't miss some important things. Maybe giving them a second opinion, you know? So, these are all ways in which it will seamlessly start playing a role and I think we'll, you know, we'll see the effects of that.” (Bloomberg Technology, 2021, 15:30).

This unit fits the description of discursive strategies because Sundar wants to convince the audience of the potential of AI in the future, which is one of the topics included in the coding frame. Its depoliticizing element lies in the idea in the background about “taken for granted” possibilities, the normalization of AI development in our lives. This corresponds to a unit where technological solutionist ideas depict a desirable and convenient future for people and Google. Therefore, it was classified under “common sense”-based strategies, since technological solutionism as a worldview is part of an established discourse accepted in the AI field.

The coding process followed an abductive approach. I started with the deductive coding frame described previously, and through the process, I built the codebook “by developing data-driven inductive codes” (Vila-Henninger et al., 2022, p. 3). The process of coding discursive strategies is a combination of inductive and deductive inference because discursive strategies do not “contain an explanation” in themselves (ibid., p. 7); neither these represent a new case of a preexistent general law (ibid.). The initial coding frame was sufficiently broad to allow identification of several dimensions of the phenomenon. The final codebook results from this broad deductive coding frame based on the theoretical approach and group coding of inductive codes. (See Appendix B for the final codebook.)

The process started with a pilot coding of eight interviews between February 27 and March 6. This process allowed the standardization of the unit, as thematic paragraphs were insufficient to guarantee a consistent process. The author went back and forth to refine the segmentation until the texts were segmented, considering when Google's CEO presented a new idea/point or made contrast; that is, the unit became an “artificial paragraph” due to the nature of video interviews. The process followed a “formal criterion for segmentation” (Schreier, 2013, p. 178), that was

replicated in the final coding conducted on March 20. Once the units were identified, and the coding frame guided the identification of broad categories, the author organized the data through open coding based on the question “What strategies are occurring?” (Strauss, 1987, as cited in Bazeley, 2013), and focusing on references that provided “a clear instance of the category, rather than a vague allusion of it” (ibid, p. 154).

Information was coded at the lowest level of abstraction, thus capturing the unit as it was. For example, if the unit referred to “AI being the most important thing humanity has worked on”, it was coded with those exact words. Subsequently, codes with similar meanings were grouped into nodes through subsumption and contrast (Schreier, 2013). In the previous example, this meant grouping all the definitions of AI. I reviewed the list of codes and defined them while recoding those that could create new categories, and merged those close enough to belong to the same node. Annotations were also used to register potential connections, patterns, and insights resulting from immersion in the data. As soon as thematic saturation (Saunders et al., 2018) was reached, the codes were classified into “common sense”-based, leader-centric and expertise-oriented discursive strategies for depoliticization, that is, the theoretical-driven dimensions for organizing the data.

Since the approach of the coding procedure is abductive, the three final subcategories were based on the theoretical approach, while the inductive coding maintained data as the central feature (Drisko & Maschi, 2015). An iterative procedure characterized the coding process to guarantee reliable interpretation of the data (Elo et al., 2014). The codes were read and refined to ensure a consistent process. The final coding procedure for the 15 interviews identified 23 themes in the three subcategories. Coding resulted in an appropriate process to build ideas reflected in pre-existing (theoretical) and new (data-driven) categories and to ask questions about the data in a systematic manner. As it was computer-based, the software allowed the exploration of data without constraints (e.g., it was possible to visualize the original context of the coded passage), and the visualization of connections between ideas, concepts, and categories was helpful in organizing an adequate coding structure.

Data Analysis

Texts are traditional sources of information about the actors that produce them. These can be analyzed using different approaches, each with different targets of concern (Benoit, 2000). Being that this thesis focuses on the identification and detailed description of discursive strategies, the findings result from the application of qualitative content analysis, “a set of techniques for the systematic analysis of texts of many kinds, addressing not only manifest content but also the

themes and core ideas found in texts as primary content.” (Drisko & Maschi, 2015, p. 82), which allowed for the collection of empirical data (ibid.), for the description of discursive strategies, and helped reduce it through a flexible coding process. As documents are socially defined (Coffey, 2014), I acknowledge video interviews as a source and an element to explore. Each interview helped me to understand how discursive strategies are situated in specific contexts of meaning.

The coding process to identify major themes and generate categories paved the way for content analysis and its focus on describing regularities in the data (Drisko & Maschi, 2015), while considering the intended and received meanings from the documents. The author followed three strategies to analyze the content. First, I focused on form and content by identifying the realities created in the document and how the document accomplished them. Second, I identified how the interviews were used (their function as documents) since documents persuade actors (Coffey, 2014). The discursive strategies embedded in these documents are persuasive tools in discursive battlefields. Beyond describing events, Sundar Pichai’s statements create realities that, when communicated through interviews, perform a function of societal impact. Third, the author pointed out the intertextuality of the interviews, that is, their “relational qualities and what these can reveal about the setting under investigation” (ibid., p. 9), or how Google’s CEO statements are connected to other realities, public philosophies, and prevailing narratives.

Quality criteria

This content analysis study was developed considering qualitative quality criteria. Each phase involved methodological choices to address trustworthiness issues to guarantee that the inquiry’s findings are “worth paying attention to” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, as cited in Elo et al., 2014, p. 2). In the preparation phase, video interviews proved to be the most suitable type of data to answer the research question through content analysis because its interactive component distances itself from a one-sided corporate discourse without the opportunity to delve into the meanings of the narratives developed. Similarly, the reasons for choosing a purposeful sampling strategy, specifically critical-case sampling, are described in detail.

In the organization phase, creating categories and abstractions resulted from thoughtful reflection based on the theoretical approach and the information that emerged from the data. Establishing the theme-oriented unit of analysis “statements in video interviews about AI, AI and technological development, regulation and processes involved, self-representation, and/or framing of the future” increased coding consistency. The author reflected on concepts and categories to avoid missing or redundant information in the coding structure. This led the analysis

to reach inductive thematic saturation (Saunders et al., 2018); that is, when new themes ceased to emerge.

The trial coding process showed that the data and method were suitable for answering the research question by allowing the identification of relevant categories appropriate to the meanings the study was looking for and practices toward the depoliticization of AI development. As a consequence, content and construct validity (Babbie, 2014) were established since “ideational power” and the categories for depoliticization covered the meanings the author had in mind, an element that was identifiable when the discursive strategies were classifiable by type (“common sense”-based, leader-centric and expertise-oriented). There was a correspondence between the constructs and the theoretical expectations, and the author’s interpretation made sense given the conceptualization that guided the coding and analysis. Furthermore, “semantic validity” (Quinn et al. 2010, 216; Ying, Montgomery, and Stewart 2019, 6, as cited in Seidl, 2021, p. 321) was achieved by showing the coherence of the topics and connections created in the analysis.

Regarding reliability, the data collection, coding, and analysis procedures were transparent through a detailed description (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008) of the steps and explained using examples of the analysis (Drisko & Maschi, 2015). The categorization process included the documentation of analytical decisions regarding the creation, modification, or deletion of nodes and categories, guaranteeing categorization integrity (Chenail, 2008). Although the thesis triangulated data sources with academic literature and previous research on the topics and theoretical approach and used them to enhance the analysis, one of the weaknesses of the study was the lack of additional documents or methods to determine whether the findings agreed with other sources. Finally, in the reporting phase, the author showed the connections between the data and findings through figures and tables when needed, as explicitly and in detail as possible to allow the reader to understand the analytical process.

5. ANALYSIS

The core argument of this thesis is that Google’s ideational power to depoliticize AI is based on discursive strategies appealing to the elements previously described: “common sense”-based, leader-centric, and expertise-oriented. These arguments are deeply intertwined; they aim at Google’s consolidation as a legitimate actor in the discursive battle to facilitate the depoliticization of AI; and draw on the intertextual and context-dependent character of Google’s discourse. Here, influencing public perception is essential. To do so, Google uses discursive strategies built on three principal categories drawn from the theoretical approach:

- a. Google adopts the meanings created in other discourses with public acceptance, demonstrating the relevance of Google’s mission by appealing to social values and ideas embedded in the collective consciousness as “common sense” (“common sense”-based).
- b. Sundar Pichai enhances the persuasive power of his arguments through personal characteristics, such as his view of what Google is and what it can do for the world, his optimistic view about emergent technologies and AI threats, and the use of stories to captivate the audience’s perception (leader-centric).
- c. Google frames its recommendations or proposals in terms of the AI expertise it has acquired in recent decades. This expertise enables it to play the role of orchestrator and to be an example of good practices for other actors aiming at the impact of people’s lives through AI (expertise-oriented).

This section delves into Sundar’s discourse to illustrate the ideational elements that enhance Google’s discursive strategies for depoliticizing AI. Table 2 summarizes their core elements:

Table 2. Google's discursive strategies to depoliticize AI

Types	Discursive strategies	Core elements
“Common sense”-based	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defining technology and AI development as matters of unquestionable benefit • Using technological solutionist ideas to depict a convenient future • Giving recommendations based on generalizations and simplifications 	<p>Issues as unquestionable</p> <p>Frame phenomena as normal/natural</p> <p>Appeal to societal values/mainstream discourse</p>
Leader-centric	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legitimizing through self-representation • Promoting Google’s agenda through personal experiences • Presenting an optimistic approach 	<p>Storytelling</p> <p>Use of personal stories and experiences</p>
Expertise-oriented	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presenting technical assistance as value-free • Claiming authoritative power based on leadership and societal impact • Calling for coordinated efforts in AI governance 	<p>Expertise as source of legitimacy and credibility</p>

Source: Author’s elaboration

“Common sense”-based discursive strategies

The discourse of AI governance actors appeals to conceptual elements that could be considered as “common sense” arguments or undeniable. The intertextual nature of Google’s discourse follows this formula of framing issues as not open to question or debate and presenting solutions as the “thing to do” since alternatives are not considered. Here, Sundar Pichai uses arguments to define AI development as predominant on the global agenda owing to the economic opportunities it brings to explain what we should do to address the digital transition and what the rational response to the challenges is. “Common sense”-based discursive strategies are embedded in a narrative of the natural evolution of AI development, resulting in unstoppable automation processes, where the reasonable thing to do is to train people in digital skills and develop responsible AI. The power of these strategies lies in their effectiveness in achieving public acceptance of an issue because the disseminated ideas are profoundly embedded in social structures and values, giving them the quality of being “taken for granted” and, therefore, exempt from debate.

The following discursive strategies are based on generalizations, universal and societal values and priorities such as economic growth and innovation, and arguments from mainstream discourse. These strategies consolidate the idea of irrefutable truths with public acceptance and ideological positions presented as *facts*. Being that common sense would not contest facts, political deliberation is reduced and conditioned by Big Tech’s worldview and presented as commonsensical arguments. Sundar Pichai communicated that AI development is happening *as it should* and *is* going well using ideational elements that others embrace as common sense. Therefore, people should not be overly concerned with this issue. Alternative options and opposition are undesirable because they affect people. They will be “left behind.” (WEF, 2020).

- **Defining technology and AI development as matters of unquestionable benefit**

Google’s definition of technology and AI development matters because it communicates how the world *is* through ideational elements. When describing technology and AI as issues that entail specific characteristics, the discourse appeals to common sense to depoliticize AI, since shaping the definition of the issues enables opportunities to lead the discursive battle to find adequate solutions. Google’s CEO described technology as a disruptive force for good, establishing it as an unquestionable matter for a prosperous future. The power of positively changing lives (Brownlee, 2021; Business Today, 2022) is stated through examples and arguments on how technology impacts economic growth and provides people with new

opportunities. For instance, when questioned about his participation in the tech hearings on Google's alleged antitrust practices and what could be misunderstood about Google, Sundar Pichai claimed:

“(…) I look at the impact from my personal experience, I see the impact technology had on me. *Technology brings opportunities to people* (emphasis added). I think we are really committed to our goal of bringing access to information and computing to as many people as possible. *And it creates a lot of impact in the economy. In the US alone, the economic activity impact is, you know, hundreds of billions of dollars and we share that, we support small businesses* (emphasis added), and, and so I think, I think it is something which I, you know, want to make sure I echo in a moment like this” (Yahoo Finance, 2021, 28:07).

Likewise, when an interviewer asked about a US senator's argument regarding Big Tech being too big, hurting small businesses, and stifling innovation, Google's CEO argued about the vital contribution these tech companies will bring to economic growth and the fact that Google competes with other countries and companies (CNN Business, 2019). Presenting the *unquestionable* economic benefits of Google's activities, where AI development is one of the most important, persuades actors to consider this *fact* before making decisions that could affect Google's interest in AI.

Similarly, Google's discourse defines AI as having unprecedented importance. This idealistic picture establishes it as one of the most substantial priorities on the global agenda and “a profound way of impacting the world” (Yahoo Finance, 2021, 41:56). The unquestionability of these benefits is justified by the developments that people are currently using. As an answer to Kara Swisher's question about what Google is doing in AI, because it seems to be talking about a “happy shiny future” (NBC News, 2018, 29:04), Sundar Pichai emphasizes that we are already using it and shows some of the functions that exist and have been normalized in people's lives:

“(…) *it's important to help people understand that they use AI today, right?* (Emphasis added) you know, one of the... AI is just, you know, making computers more intelligent and be able to do, you know, a wide variety of tasks. *And we take it for granted whenever something happens and we actually adopt it* (emphasis added). So, for example, today, Google can translate across many, many languages and people use it billions of times a day. That's because of AI. Or if you use a product like Google Photos, if you go to Google and search for images of “sunset”, or if you go to Google Photos and search for “people hugging”, we can actually pull together people... you know, show photos of people hugging. This is all because of AI. So, you know, it's first of all important to

understand, you know, there are early stages of AI here and we use it today. We don't take just a very optimistic view of AI. *AI is one of the most important things humanity is working on. It's more profound than, I don't know, electricity or fire (...)* (emphasis added)" (NBC News, 2018, 29:17).

Awareness of the benefits of current AI persuades people to believe in its future transformative power. In other words, in the future, we will benefit from accepting more innovation, and the proof is that we now benefit from technological change and take it for granted. This perception also influences people to question their concerns and consider that the benefits, some of which we currently experience, outweigh the potential risks. By defining technology and AI development as matters of unquestionable benefit, Google depoliticizes AI because it provides arguments considered legitimate that limit or prevent further involvement by society and its power to define issues at stake.

- **Using technological solutionist ideas to depict a convenient future**

Technological solutionism is at the core of Google's beliefs. The idea that technologies have the power to address the most significant societal challenges was presented more than once in the interviews as common knowledge, and this belief justifies the kind of future Google depicts to the public. The persuasive power of Google's CEO's ideas is exerted through solutionist arguments that legitimize Google's dominance and intervention in the future, and the belief about technologies solving the most pressing issues permeates each sector and connects to the global agenda and the imaginaries and desires of the people. Google's future shows the opportunities that we *will* have access to, affirming that technologies will evolve as part of a natural process.

Google's invitation to adopt its view embodies a promise: AI will bring more benefits than anything people have seen before (NDTV, 2017). Once again, the benign potential of AI is stated as a *fact*, as is the argument that its disruptive power will touch almost all sectors (Yahoo Finance, 2021; Stanford Graduate School of Business, 2022). Google's technological solutionism promises that AI will solve challenging problems in healthcare, climate change, and education, to mention the most referenced sectors in the video interviews. Sundar Pichai explains through examples how AI will change people's lives in fundamental areas:

"AI is more profound, because it'll apply to everything you do. I think it'll increase human knowledge. It'll increase human productivity and, you know... on the, you know, will lead to many positive outcomes. *You know, early detection of cancer is an obvious example to think through, and being able to assist teachers and better educate, better educational tools is a great example*

(emphasis added). So, there are many positive things which will come out of it” (CNN Business, 2019, 29:05).

These examples have enough societal relevance to motivate actors to support the AI development envisioned from Google’s perspective. From how AI will help doctors detect diseases (NDTV, 2017; WEF, 2020) to how it will help us obtain renewable energy (WEF, 2018), Google’s examples normalize a future where AI has a technological solution for each possible societal problem, a convenient scenario for AI companies and experts, and the promotion of Google’s global character. For instance, Sundar’s approach to providing solutions to *inevitable* automation by training people at local and national levels worldwide:

“(…) The second part is, I think we are engaging with local governments, institutions. For example, if you look at our digital skills training, which I think you know, we didn't talk much about, but the biggest urgent issue to do with technologies... *we all need to retrain the workforce* (emphasis added). Gone are the days when you could educate yourself once and that will give you a job for the rest of your life. *How do you do that at scale is something very important, and we are doing this locally in every country* (emphasis added). We have committed to a billion dollars over the next five years. In Europe alone, we have trained 3 million people, and *we localize these programs in every country. And we plan to do a lot more of these things* (emphasis added).” (WEF, 2018, 25:50).

The narrative of a new time in which people need to re-educate themselves through life and adapt to a flexible market is the narrative pushing for career shifts in a normalized AI-centered future. When questioned about the potential job loss due to automation processes, robotics, and self-driving technology, Google’s CEO stated that AI progress *will* occur and explained the need to transform education, which Google is tackling with training and certification programs (NBC News, 2018). In a future where AI will solve societal problems, being digitally literate is *the* alternative to being part of the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

Since Sundar’s arguments unveil an unstoppable technological evolution as common sense, obtaining qualifications in the technology field is imperative, and Google offers technological solutions and policy recommendations to help others adapt to the digital economy. Google’s ideational leader uses these predictions to incite actors to embrace change and adapt, which prevents them from pursuing alternative options because *that is how the future will happen*. This scenario is described as something that neither Google nor other companies or actors have control over, and if this means that most of the workforce worldwide will have to change professional paths and goals, the *only logical course* of action is adaptation.

- **Giving recommendations based on generalizations and simplifications**

Sundar Pichai's interventions reveal a consultative role that Google is assuming *de facto*. When interviewers question him about the big challenges of AI development, his answers are opinions and recommendations that appeal to generalizations. Vagueness has the depoliticizing effect of allowing actors to signal a stance without concrete actions, blurring responsibilities and liabilities. In Google's discourse, it is possible to find generalizations and simplifications in its ideas to address the most compelling issues in the current AI debate. That is, how to manage AI threats and what to do regarding the challenges posed by digital transition.

In regards to the first issue, Google's position shows the use of formulaic considerations adopted and accepted by other actors as reasonable in the past and "common sense"-based statements without further development. For example, the claim that AI development brings benefits but has harmful effects if they are misused, which he calls the "dual side" of technologies (CNN Business, 2019; Brownlee, 2021; Bloomberg Technology, 2021; U.S. Chamber of Commerce, 2022), or declaring that being worried but keeping working on AI responsibly is an approach to address AI threats (Bloomberg Technology, 2021). From what Google communicates, it could be understood that there is no need to stop and evaluate. Instead, AI development will continue doing what it is doing, just focusing on doing it *correctly* (Recode, 2022). As an illustration of these generalizations, Google referred to broad or non-concrete elements to answer about specific AI threats, such as algorithmic bias or the effect of Big Data in increasing social inequalities:

"(...) but the risks are important, and *I think the way we solve it is, we think ahead, we worry about it* (emphasis added). We do things like from, from, be upfront, you know, have ethical charters. *Think about AI safety from day one. Be very transparent and open in how we perceive progress there* (emphasis added), and figure out global frameworks by which we can engage, just like Paris Agreement on climate change. Using forums like this. I think we bring people together to engage on the hard questions, and I think answers will emerge" (WEF, 2018, 6:42).

Furthermore, expressions consolidated as part of AI governance jargon are incorporated into Google's CEO discourse. For instance, the need to harness the benefits of AI (WEF, 2018; Yahoo Finance, 2021; Stanford Graduate School of Business, 2022) or ensure that AI works well for the world (U.S. Chamber of Commerce, 2022). These ideas resonate with *common sense* and are substitutes for practical actions and debates. "We all," as part of democratic institutions, agree that AI development should work for people's benefit. The vagueness of Google's recommendations also allowed Sundar to change the focus of concern. He identified the rejection

of technological progress as the main threat when he said that “the biggest risk with AI may be failing to work on it and make more progress with it because it can impact billions of people” (WEF, 2020, 2:40). Simply put, Google recognizes AI threats. However, these are not compared to the impact of rejecting technological development.

When speaking about the second main topic of concern, the challenges of the digital transition, the idea of opposition emerges again as a threat because when people “turn their backs on technology, they get left behind, too” (WEF, 2020, 25:48). Sundar’s discourse describing governmental responsibilities to adapt to the digital transition refers to generalizations and simplifications when it highlights the importance for countries to grow their economies and invest in training people to be prepared for the transition (U.S. Chamber of Commerce, 2022). Considering that Google is one of the leading companies in AI development and a recognized expert in digital skilling worldwide, the narrative seems to safeguard Google’s economic interests as an AI developer and legitimize it as a strategic actor in the Fourth Industrial Revolution, an actor with ideational power to give recommendations with political impact, even though these are based on depoliticizing generalizations and arguments. Here, politics remain in Google’s power through ideas while being denied in the AI arena.

Leader-centric discursive strategies

An ideational leader’s character and individual traits matter and shape discursive strategies for persuading actors in discursive battles. Whether sharing personal stories connected to the interests they want to promote or framing issues based on their particular worldview or priorities, ideational leaders consider diverse elements related to who they are to influence other stakeholders’ opinions and actions. Leader-centric discursive strategies entail storytelling and the strategic use of personality attributes to connect with interlocutors. Google’s CEO, Sundar Pichai, communicates Google’s discourse with a distinctive hallmark, similar to how previous CEOs stated arguments using traits connected with the company’s interests in the past. Although Google’s mission is the same, its leader-centric discursive strategies change with each ideational leader in the top management.

The strategies in this subsection show how Sundar Pichai’s worldview, or *Weltanschauung* (Schmidt, 2008), was used to depoliticize AI. Through his authoritative power, Google’s CEO legitimizes Google’s image and dominance, promotes its agenda based on his personal experiences, and presents an optimistic approach to AI threats and challenges, shedding light on Google’s interest in maintaining leadership in the field and expecting to influence public

perception of AI development by convincing people that concerns are natural, but everything will be fine.

- **Legitimizing through self-representation**

Sundar Pichai's discourse shows that Google, one of the most important IT companies in the world, acknowledges its position of authority in the AI field. Although the persuasive power of an idea lies in its cognitive and normative elements (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2016), the perception of others regarding the actor expressing it also matters. In his role as Google's representative, Sundar shaped Google's self-representation as a global, user-centric, ethical, and engaged key player with a broad mission. This representation is a relevant resource for the exercise of ideational power. It consolidates Google as a legitimate actor with enough qualifications and authoritative power to define and propose solutions to AI challenges.

Sundar's representation of Google has three main dimensions. First, Google's perception as a universal services provider. Sundar's discourse draws on statements with floating signifiers to present their services as both universal and inclusive. For instance, when he was questioned about his reason to stay at Google, he described Google's scale and reach:

“(...) And a big part of it is, if you look at our products, *search works everywhere around the world* (emphasis added). You know, we take pride in providing it and *it's accessible to everyone as long as they have computing and connectivity* (emphasis added) that they are here at Stanford, or a kid in rural Indonesia. Google works for you. And that's the philosophy we bring across our products. Be Gmail, be Maps, be YouTube, *so we think about scale, being able to reach people* (emphasis added) and make technology more accessible, and it's what I wanted to do in my life and so, it's a privilege to do it (Stanford Graduate School of Business, 2022, 8:45).

With a market share of more than 80% of the total engine search market (Reuters, 2023), there are, indeed, reasons to believe that Google's services *are* universal. Throughout the interviews, Google's CEO presented this universal character as a natural condition, since Google's mission is to bring information to people. The depoliticizing effect of this depiction lies in the possibilities that Google has to expand its reach. Bringing information to people refers to content moderation, the definition of the digital space, and actions toward privacy and data protection (or lack thereof), among other decisions that impact democratic institutions and participation. When Google represents itself as the one who undertook the journey of providing and managing information (WEF, 2018), the company presents its mission as something that *just is*. “Being for all” and “having a mission” help Google to naturalize its arguments, creating distance from political

debates while appealing to the provision of universal services and a multisectoral and timeless mission (WEF, 2018; Bloomberg Technology, 2021). Sundar's representation supports the idea of an ever-present and taken-for-granted actor with a universal reach and impact.

Second, the user-centric (Recode, 2016) nature of Google. Sundar constantly refers to the importance of users' trust in Google's work and describes the proximity between the company and users as Google is part of their needs in everyday life, stating that its responsibility is acting under the user's trust (Bloomberg Technology, 2021). When Sundar declares a missional commitment to the user's benefit, he shows how the tech giant aims to assist and befriend its users and provide sufficient value to maintain trust (Recode, 2016). In an interview with CNN Business (2019), he appealed to this element to answer the question of what Google is, whether a search, ad, or AI business: "At our core level, we want to be helpful to users in moments big and small through the course of their day. And be giving you driving directions or be it helping to show you photos back when you need it. And we want to do it for billions of users at moments that matter" (0:23).

Third, Sundar's perception emphasizes Google's ethical commitment. On the one hand, he shows Google's adherence to global agendas. Inclusion of women in tech (NDTV, 2017; WEF, 2018; NBC News, 2018; CNN Business, 2019), advocacy for skilled immigration (NBC News, 2018; CNN Business, 2019; Yahoo Finance, 2021), and sustainable goals (Stanford Graduate School of Business, 2022; Recode, 2022) as relevant examples brought up in the interviews. On the other hand, Sundar Pichai's narrative of how Google is developing AI is intended to demonstrate Google's ethical approach among the increasing criticism of the behavior of Big Tech companies. His answer to how well Google is doing in AI ethics expresses this purpose:

"You know, if I look at the work we have done on AI ethics, we are one of the largest publishers in this area. We've written hundreds of papers by now. We share information, we engage openly (emphasis added). You know, it's a cutting-edge field. [Omitted text] obviously we have concerns in certain areas. So, you know, I think we are learning and doing it better, but, you know, I genuinely think we've approached it very responsibly (emphasis added)" (Recode, 2022, 10:52).

As shown, his discourse focused on Google's actions toward ethical AI. Other examples include his mention of Google's AI principles as a tool against which they will evaluate their work on an ongoing basis (CNN Business, 2019), and counter bias as an active area of their research (WEF, 2020). By showing evidence of Google's commitment to ethical frameworks, Sundar strengthens Google's ideational leadership through normative elements embedded in his beliefs as CEO and *Googler*. This, in turn, contributes to the normalization of Google's ideational dominance.

- **Promoting Google’s agenda through personal experiences**

Sundar Pichai is different from other tech leaders. His image does not match the stereotype of an overly visible and eccentric tech CEO. Born in India and with a middle-class upbringing, Sundar’s public image shows him as an example of a successful, self-made person. In an interview with New Delhi Television (NDTV), the interviewer asked about Sundar’s success even though he did not drop out of college (as other famous tech leaders did), and despite being a good man. He answered that he had too much fun to leave college and that being a good person and doing well were not at odds with each other (NDTV, 2017). Sundar’s responses appeal to moral values as a navigation chart of his actions and Google’s actions, a relevant element in the persuasion of a discourse.

Using normative arguments through personal experiences allows him to promote Google’s agenda and legitimize its leadership and control because the narrative persuades other actors about how life-changing access to technology is by showing how it impacted his life. Stories such as how Sundar did not have much access to a computer growing up (CNN Business, 2019; Yahoo Finance, 2021; Bloomberg Technology, 2021) or how his family waited five years to get a rotary phone (Yahoo Finance, 2021; Brownlee, 2021; Stanford Graduate School of Business, 2022; U.S. Chamber of Commerce, 2022) show others that he *is* a clear example of how access to technology transforms people and communities:

“We grew up modestly. But through discrete moments, we got access to something new in our life. So, we waited for a telephone for about five years. And we had to apply and wait for it. Before that, there was only one street and... In the entire street, there was one other home which had a telephone, so sometimes you would go there to make a call. *And for me once we got the telephone, others would come to our house, it was kind of an open-door thing, it became a communal thing* (emphasis added), people would come to call their kids. And so, *for me it showed the power of what's possible with technology* (emphasis added).” (CNN Business, 2019, 3:59).

His personal experience explains to the public his interest in driving more profound technological progress (Brownlee, 2021) and his belief in using technology to solve societal challenges (Yahoo Finance, 2021). Sundar seems to be an approachable person with a warm and serene character, who transmits trust. His words reflect someone interested in the solutions and users, instead of a *power-oriented* leader (Stiller, 2010). Therefore, when a leader with a relatable past for most of the population and admirable motivations advocates technological development, the idea is likely to be accepted as desirable in the public arena.

Sundar's personal experiences influence public perception and strengthen support for Google's development while decreasing the chances of contestation. In other words, people could believe that if this assertive person, an Indian immigrant with a modest childhood, became Google's CEO and his life was transformed because of technological developments, it would be reasonable to embrace Google's actions. His self-representation reflects middle-class values, which could influence the public to embrace his discourse, because he uses elements to which the public can relate: his origins, dreams, and meritocratic promotion. He appeals to an emotional aspect that connects with others and helps to consolidate support for Google's vision and initiatives.

- **Presenting an optimistic approach**

The persuasive power of an idea also lies in the tactics ideational leaders choose to support their arguments. Actors have approached AI development from different perspectives, focusing on benefits or threats. Sundar focused on the potential and benefits of AI, calling himself an optimist about technologies:

“Over time, for something like AI, you will need no different for something as big as climate change. You have concepts like Paris Agreement, you know, you will need global frameworks because... to, to think about it, but *I am optimistic. I mean, I think, you know, I see the benefits of all of the, how all of this can impact* (emphasis added), and we have worked together hard to address issues in the past” (Brownlee, 2021, 4:02).

Whenever an interviewer raised a problematic situation with societal consequences due to unregulated AI (e.g., hate speech, algorithmic bias, cyberattacks), Sundar acknowledged these issues and explained Google's ethical initiatives to improve its products and services. His positive language signaled confidence and communicated that there was nothing to be concerned about, or if there was, we would overcome all the obstacles. When he states that “a lot of things will play out in more positive ways than people think” (WEF, 2018, 6:39), Google's CEO expects to impact how people understand AI and perceive its potentially harmful effects. Sundar reframes being concerned as a natural process in which things turn out to be good. The following example shows his general approach to the issues raised during the interviews. In this particular case, internet freedom:

“(...) You know to my earlier framework; we always worry about things. You know, somebody forwarded me an op-ed 150 years ago when bicycles were invented. And, in the leading newspapers, they were worried that bicycles would give freedom to girls and they would get on bicycles and ride

very far away, and would really cost society to break down. *So, I think that's how we worry and constantly make things better. But things turn out very differently* (emphasis added). To me, you can think about the internet as a set of technologies, and that will continue to evolve. But if you think about the internet, as an ideal, the ideal of giving anyone in the world a chance to get connected with everyone else give them opportunity at a global scale [omitted text]. So, I think the Internet, *we have to worry about it* (emphasis added). *But you know, I'm optimistic. I'm optimistic about technology, not because I believe in technology, but because I believe in people and humanity* (emphasis added). And you know, I think it's a good construct to move forward.” (WEF, 2018, 15:25).

Thus, concern is framed as part of the process of better governance of the most pressing issues. In the same way that there are concerns that now seem absurd or have been solved, we will face diverse concerns about AI, and discursive battles will be part of the process. These appreciations are indeed reasonable, which is where their depoliticizing effects lie. Sundar's optimism aligns with how things have happened in the past, assuming that concerns about AI development will change following this pattern. However, AI is a powerful invention that evolves faster and entails complex challenges for lawmakers, governments, and the same AI companies. Optimism, in this case, helps Google deal with potential opposition and decontextualize the complexities of AI development and the social realities it produces. Ultimately, Google is a business for profit, and shifting public perception allows it to maintain its ideational power to continue its global operations.

Expertise-oriented discursive strategies

Expertise is a relevant source to depoliticize an issue. Google is perceived as an expert in the AI field, and its answers are considered fundamental in the AI governance arena for decision-making processes. Google's expertise makes them legitimate actors with sufficient authority to produce guidelines and explain to others what it entails to support AI development. Sundar's discourse appeals to Google's role as a technical assistance provider, framing it as part of its neutral and objective actions, even though the technical answers they provide are permeated by a particular technical interpretation focusing on specific dimensions of the issue while ignoring others.

The discourse also highlights expertise-oriented arguments that support Google's authoritative power. Sundar describes Google as a leader in the field, placing it in a tactical position. He sheds light on the positive outcomes of Google's developments in the world, incorporating cognitive arguments to explain the relevance and applicability of these initiatives. Based on favorable indicators in terms of how Google's products are used, their impact on

everyday life, and how they respond to new policy challenges in the digital era, Google's CEO used his foreground discursive abilities (Schmidt, 2010a) to show how his recommendations are coherent and could solve problems that should be unraveled with the guidance and support of technology experts. Likewise, Google relies on the expertise of other actors when calling for coordinated efforts in AI governance. The need for collaborative mechanisms redistributes responsibilities and shapes the role of stakeholders, allowing Google to influence how others think about them and to gather more arguments about its apolitical character.

- **Presenting technical assistance as value-free**

The technical assistance and funding Google provides to developing countries, startups, and underrepresented communities is framed as a neutral intervention to help the world address societal challenges. However, Google's assistance disseminates their knowledge as knowledge *by default* in areas where they intervene and aligns beneficiaries with Google's agenda and values. By presenting their actions and investments as a product of their engagement with the world, the possibility of other actors intervening and defining alternative endeavors is not even considered. Google defines solutions based on its expertise in the field to respond to a need determined by Big Tech. Their interventions define the importance of topics on the agenda since they *know* that these are the most important things to address. For instance, their digital skills training programs (TechCity, 2017; WEF, 2018; NBC News, 2018; U.S. Chamber of Commerce, 2022):

“(...) over time we've understood things we can do well, and things other organizations are better at doing. An area for example, *given our focus on information, skilling has been a big focus for us, digital skilling* (emphasis added). [Omitted text] and, *when I look at the demand that is from people for these things* (emphasis added), and so, I think as a society, we need to figure out about how we can scale and give access to digital skilling to more people. So, but *that's an area where we feel Google can strongly contribute, and so we choose and get involved in areas like that* (emphasis added), sustainability is another one. So, you know, we choose where we think we can add value (Stanford Graduate Business School, 2022, 30:07).

The previous example shows that Google's technical expertise in providing information justifies its involvement in digital skilling worldwide. Using the discursive strategies mentioned in the previous subsections, Google expresses technological solutionist ideas to depict a future aligned with the company's interests, creating a need. With its presentation of value-free assistance, Google provides solutions to the need the same sector created. In other words, society ends up

adapting to Big Tech's interests in transitioning to a digital economy. Their expertise shapes other actors' beliefs about what we need as a society and what we should do to achieve it.

When Google provides a solution based on its own interpretation of AI development, it positions itself as a necessary actor to solve the issue. By engaging at the national level while simultaneously being local, they influence where governments and citizens place value. As private actors, they are not required to solve certain issues. However, since AI is permeating every sector and profession, Big Tech's expert assistance is defining a measure of progress in society. In an interview in 2018, a person from the audience asked Sundar what someone with a non-technical background could do to become a more suitable candidate in the tech sector. The recommendation shows how allegedly neutral assistance is establishing policy priorities *de facto*:

“(...) I think when... participating in the technology sector is not about learning code or computer science. That's just one part of it. *I think retraining, equipping ourselves with digital skills is the way you make these transitions, right?* (Emphasis added). And, you know, there are, there are many categories of job, I gave IT support as an example, the actual qualification to... to learn and be qualified to do IT support. You know, it's possible for many more people than they realize. And it's one of the fastest growing jobs in the country. *So, it's, it's... healthcare is a great example, there are many healthcare jobs, whether it's labor shortage, so, I think it's understanding that and retraining people to be able to do those things is what we need to do* (emphasis added).” (NBC News, 2018, 44:29).

Google's ideational power shapes the future and provides solutions to match these imaginaries. Technical assistance helps spread the message and consolidates agreements regarding what is needed to address societal challenges. Framed as one of Google's neutral activities, it strengthens Google's position in AI governance and its credibility at national and local levels and justifies an agenda that has been built on Big Tech's expertise and alleged neutrality, imposed as a reality instead of being a product of political deliberation.

- **Claiming authoritative power based on leadership and societal impact**

One of the aspects by which an actor is considered to have leadership is related to the experience they have regarding the problem to be solved and the social impact of their actions. In the case of Google, Sundar claims authoritative power because of its extensive experience in the field and the impact of its products and services on the daily lives of billions of people. When asked why he thinks Google can do it better than all its competitors in AI, Google's CEO manifested his confidence in their approach to technological development since their pioneering work in AI precedes Google's expertise:

“First of all, *we’ve been doing it for a lot longer* (emphasis added). So, when you look at the scale at which we do today, either in terms of the raw computational power we apply to it, how many years we’ve been doing it, or if you benchmark it in terms of any quality metrics. So, if you take, if you take, for example, any kind of conversational, you know, conversations you have with Google, our ability to answer questions at scale, globally, in depth [omitted text]. And so, *it’s both in terms of the usage today, and the scale at which we do it* (emphasis added).” (Recode, 2016, 3:43).

Google’s CEO proclaimed that his is one of the leading companies in AI (CNN Business, 2019), doing work that leads many others worldwide (Yahoo Finance, 2021). This power allows them to lead conversations and institute their knowledge, practices, and ideas as the foundation for how to govern technologies. However, an actor’s competence and establishment of epistemic authority are ideationally constructed (Obendiek & Seidl, 2023). The discursive strategy depoliticizes through the recognition of Google as one of the *indisputable* actors in understanding what AI is, how to develop it, and how to deploy it in society.

Similarly, Google manifests through its CEO the idea that Google’s investments and programs are impacting the world for good, creating economic opportunities (WEF, 2020), and helping address challenges that would have been managed exclusively by public actors in the past. For instance, how they have been tackling misinformation during the Ukraine-Russia War (Stanford Graduate School of Business, 2022). Although Google’s immense power in public affairs is no stranger to other Big Tech companies, they asserted authority in the interviews by suggesting that the world *needs* what they are doing:

“I look at the fact that there are *3 billion people who have access to knowledge at their fingertips* (emphasis added). I look at the opportunity we provide. I look at the skills people are learning through YouTube. You know, *I feel it everywhere when I go talk to people and providing access to information and knowledge* (emphasis added). I think we’ll end up being on the right side of history as well” (Bloomberg Technology, 2021, 2:57).

By claiming authoritative power through leadership and societal impact, Google ensures that its ideas are contemplated at the expense of ideas from stakeholders considered less knowledgeable or without credentials to raise concerns about AI development or demand alternatives to prevent potential threats. Sundar’s statement about Google being ahead in AI development (Recode, 2016) has influenced the imaginaries of AI governance actors about leadership in AI.

- **Calling for coordinated efforts in AI governance**

Establishing coordination mechanisms provides depoliticization power based on the recognized expertise of other actors (Louis & Maertens, 2021). A manifested support for coordination efforts toward regulation has characterized Google's discourse regarding AI governance and its constant reference to the need to include others has a desirable effect on Google's ideational power. First, it depicts Google as an engaged actor willing to build on all participants' expertise, a neutral collaborator whose interests align with the interests of other stakeholders. By welcoming collaboration with external experts in the government, academia, and other sectors, Google is publicly leveling the playing field:

“(…) We see already benefits, be it in health care, be it in education, but we have to be responsible in how we develop it. *And so, for example, as Google, we have articulated publicly AI principles, but this is, this is something not just Google, but nonprofits, academic institutions, governments, with, with the right regulatory approach* (emphasis added). We need to make sure we steward AI and other important technologies to make sure they work well for the world.” (U.S. Chamber of Commerce, 2022, 9:52)

However, Google has a clear idea of how it would prefer regulations to be. Their guidelines and recommendations are based on Google's technical expertise, which is why Google's participation is considered legitimate. Although they publicly embrace the need for regulatory frameworks developed collaboratively, Sundar's discourse has the potential to persuade the scope of AI regulation, stressing that it needs to be balanced (CNN Business, 2019; WEF, 2020; Stanford Graduate School of Business, 2022). In other words, regulation that does not threaten Big Tech's current activities. Otherwise, regulating for the sake of regulating could have unforeseen consequences (CNN Business, 2019).

The use of the common argument in the governance field about the importance of coordinated efforts to develop regulations and the need for global frameworks to approach AI (WEF, 2018; WEF, 2020; Brownlee, 2021) distributes responsibilities more suitably for Google and other companies. The expertise of others is as responsible for the outcomes as Google's is, and the other actors are also accountable for failures in the process:

“(…) And as, as democratic countries with a shared set of values, *we need to, you know, build on those values and make sure when we approach AI, we are doing it in a way that serves society* (emphasis added). And that means, making sure AI doesn't have bias that we build and test it for safety, we make sure that there is human agency, that it's ultimately accountable to people. In about

18 months ago, we published a set of principles under which we will develop AI as Google. But it's been very encouraging to see the European Commission, has identified AI and sustainability as their... you know, top priorities. And it's... US put out a set of principles last week, and be the OECD or G20 (emphasis added). They are talking about this, which I think is very, very encouraging. And I think we need a common framework by which we approach AI.” (WEF, 2020, 7:51)

The expertise-oriented actions of Google toward AI challenges present it as a qualified actor in the arena, and the statements about engagement with others' expertise and how much they want to be a constructive partner (WEF, 2018, 21:00) set the stage for Google to establish the role of other actors and consolidate its own role in the process. For example, Sundar appeals to governmental expertise to guarantee the conditions for the transition to digital economies (U.S. Chamber of Commerce, 2022; Yahoo Finance, 2021), support for Google and other actors' initiatives to drive inclusive growth (U.S. Chamber of Commerce, 2022), and the formation of public-private partnerships to address the challenges embedded in technological innovation (NBC News, 2018). If decisions are based on the expertise of diverse actors, their actions can be framed as apolitical outcomes of collaboration.

In short, the discursive strategies identified are a set of practices through which Google persuades other actors and the public to embrace and do what is needed to maintain the meaning that benefits its interests as an AI developer and leader in the field. These strategies reveal the relevance of Google's legitimation and the intertextuality of its discourse for Google's overall discursive strategy. Sundar Pichai exerts ideational power *through* ideas using ideational elements such as narratives of successful developments, programs, and investments, personal stories, and impactful examples of technological benefits.

In order to be persuasive, the discursive strategies embedded in Sundar Pichai's discourse appeal to the need for AI development and general narratives depicting its impact in terms of societal values and appropriateness to solve the biggest challenges. In other words, they incorporate cognitive and normative arguments that motivate actors to align with Google's interests. Each of these strategies constrains political contestation by stating a specific way to understand AI development and Google's leading role, where Sundar Pichai is an agent persuading audiences to support Google's agenda and, at the same time, a product of a worldview that determines technological development as the solution for the challenges of the future.

6. DISCUSSION

Even though the thesis' findings support the existence of an active public narrative (Culpepper & Thelen, 2020) that communicates a user-centric motivation in Google's activities, the set of discursive strategies driving the depoliticization of AI through the legitimization of Google's self-representation as an ideational leader suggests that its ideational power actively protects Google's self-interest in AI discursive battles. This is evidenced by the ideational elements to ensure support for Google's AI development, products, and services as well as the apparent interest in defining societal problems and their solutions (Monsees et al., 2023). Google's discourse defines the problems and suggests solutions, showing how Sundar's arguments are not value-free, since his discursive strategies have the purpose of consolidating AI development as an answer to the most pressing societal challenges, defined, and prioritized according to the Big Tech agenda.

Two elements mentioned in previous studies stand out in the battle for ideational dominance. On the one hand, solutionism as a weapon that justifies the future Big Tech wants and a frame for ethical self-representation (Seidl & Nachtwey, 2020). Google frames all its efforts as an answer to help the user while reminding the world that it has a decisive role in the social impact of technologies on billions of people's lives. On the other hand, *authoritative expertise* (Willers, 2021) as the rationale behind "neutral" technical assistance, Google's leadership for societal impact, and its role as an orchestrator for coordination. Google's ideas are *powered through expertise* (Seabrooke & Wigan, 2016) to influence public perception. Therefore, technological solutionism and expertise have been incorporated into discursive strategies to protect Google's interests through AI depoliticization. However, this thesis suggests that these are not exclusive elements to advance on the battlefield, because ideational elements based on personal stories and attitudes can also serve the self-interested purposes of actors.

Furthermore, the intertextual nature of these discursive strategies insinuates how depoliticization is, in fact, a phenomenon produced and reinforced by different actors. Google's discourse shows patterns of other discourses appealing to political correctness for public acceptance, such as the discourses of international organizations (e.g., OECD, World Economic Forum) and governments worldwide. It adheres to global agendas, as these actors do, and is based on the same values. Both Google and other actors present AI as something inevitable, an idea that Big Tech has spread and has been successfully adopted by governments, as Bareis and Katzenbach (2022) showed in their research on national AI strategies. However, a public discourse with these characteristics has profound political and social implications. As a discourse that remains in generalities, it overlooks the material conditions that could be perpetuated (Moore, 2020), such

as under-employment and exploitation, and the consolidation of a society of algorithms dominated by data capitalists making AI work for themselves (Burrell & Fourcade, 2021).

In this regard, Google's public discourse merely touched the surface, as other discourses in AI governance have done. Sundar Pichai focused on the potential of AI and answered questions about threats being as little specific as possible. Although Google could be considered a company that has shown interest in discussing responsible AI through guidelines and public appearances, it uses virtue-signaling language instead of defining actions to address the biggest AI threats. Being so, what can people expect from other Big Tech companies that are less interested in demonstrating political correctness? What would happen if Google's dominance were threatened by others who do not even participate in public *forums*? Google's position as an ideational leader is, in fact, an opportunity for the company to demonstrate that its ethical approach goes beyond intertextuality with mainstream discourse. At this critical moment in AI development, there is a call to action to translate generalities into specific decisions that influence other companies' decision-making processes to benefit those Big Tech claim they serve: the people.

Google's protection of its self-interest and shared depoliticizing discourse coexist in a dangerous *status-quo* paradox. These discursive strategies reinforce the social inequalities of pre-existing structures (e.g., neoliberalism) while presenting disruptive narratives such as the transformative power of AI. Through narratives of innovation, inclusion, and progress, Google's discourse legitimizes systems of knowledge that have been proven to create social exclusion by design, thereby maintaining the state of affairs but deepening inequalities through technological means. The "comforting technological fix to structural societal problems" (Bareis & Katzenbach, 2022, p. 876) undermines people's political identities while the actors with power for ideational change (e.g., media) keep asking the wrong questions. Google exerts ideational power to maintain people's concerns at a safe distance by self-promoting and showing adherence to the global agenda of AI.

However, some people have started to voice their concerns and realize the threat that this paradox represents. On March 22, thousands of AI researchers and experts co-signed an open letter calling for "AI labs to immediately pause for at least 6 months the training of AI systems more powerful than GPT-4" (Future of Life Institute, 2023, p. 2), considering the real challenge that it has become the fast pace of AI development for the regulation of AI systems. When asked about it in a recent interview for the New York Times podcast *Hard Fork*, Sundar said that the specifics of the petition were unclear to him, and he could not see such a pause without getting governments involved (Roose & Newton, 2023, 32:57 – 33:35).

Despite Big Tech companies arguing about the feasibility of such a scenario, which is usually connected to the consequences it could have for the geopolitics of AI, people are becoming more aware of the extent to which responsible AI is a matter of political will. Thus, scrutinizing Big Tech's discourse is the first step toward a (re)politicization of AI development, an effort in which this thesis is circumscribed. Understanding the discursive strategies of one of the most important Big Tech actors and how Google's ideational power is exerted through public discourse represents a step in the direction of bottom-up discursive strategies to restore peoples' political agency for the definition of responsible AI development.

From a theoretical perspective, these results contribute to the discursive institutionalist field by deepening the understanding of discursive strategies as a concept, when identifying and characterizing key dimensions for depoliticizing AI. This thesis clarifies how discursive strategies are conceived and the ideational elements that make them persuasive tools in the exercise of ideational power. These elements can be a foundation for future research in DI, either in the field of depoliticization or others. By exploring the components of discursive strategies, future researchers could understand the nature of this concept and its implications for studying ideational power as a whole. From a practical perspective, this thesis provides new insights into the recent phenomenon of Big Tech dominance in the AI field, an issue that has been studied from other perspectives and academic fields, focusing on compulsory, institutional, and structural types of power.

Future research should address the limitations of the study (See Chapter 4) by broadening the scope and exploring the ideational power exerted in private scenarios to understand how it impacts the discourse's coordinative arena; that is, to what extent the relationships between companies and governments and within Big Tech impact the decision-making process in AI regulation and governance mechanisms. In the same spirit, including other Big Tech companies in the analysis will bring opportunities to find discursive similarities and differences between the actors that dominate the AI field, and the depth of future studies would benefit from an approach to ideational leaders using research techniques such as interviews, with which Big Tech's opinion on the depoliticization processes will be possible, as well as more tools to deepen the study of the use of emotions as a tool in the construction of discursive strategies.

Finally, since ideational power is conceived as "a top-down and bottom-up process" (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2016, p. 322), further research should explore the most effective tools for citizens to demand participation mechanisms in defining AI development, and to what extent it should be implemented. This thesis contributes an adequate framework for this purpose by exposing Google's main narratives and arguments to defend its position in the discursive arena.

Based on this framework, civil society and NGOs focused on raising awareness about the potential sociopolitical impacts of emergent technologies, educational institutions, and local governments could identify and build bottom-up discursive strategies for the (re)politicization of AI, guaranteeing the benefit of society as a whole instead of the economic benefit for a group of experts with a monopolistic nature.

7. CONCLUSION

Winning a discursive battle amid a global AI race means being able to define how the world will be in the following decades. The tech sector changes every minute, and new developments bring winners and losers. The level of persuasion of the arguments used in interactions with other actors could guarantee ideational leadership or erase entire companies from the map. As one of the first Big Tech companies to publicly manifest a commitment to ethical AI, Google seems to understand the stakes of discursive AI battles and how crucial it is for the company to argue in favor of continuous AI development aligned with the interests of shareholders and investors, which is why it has developed a cohesive discourse to influence actors' beliefs about AI.

As with any discourse, Google's discourse is susceptible to being explored and scrutinized, and in answer to that possibility, this thesis aimed to identify and characterize the company's discursive strategies for depoliticizing AI and it explored the ideational elements on which discursive strategies were consolidated through a qualitative case study. It showed how, in practice, Google exerted ideational power through ideas for the depoliticization of AI development and how those ideas had similar foundations. First, the appeal to "common sense"-based arguments, where the definition of the issue (AI development as a phenomenon of natural evolution that will bring an unquestionable benefit) is the first element shaping the overall strategy since it sets the stage for technological solutionist ideas to depict Google's version of the future and for it to give recommendations aligned to these definitions.

Second, the use of personal characteristics to legitimize the discourse. In this case, Sundar's representation of Google, his personal experiences about access to technology, and an ever-present optimism in the interviews promote Google's agenda and depoliticize AI's harmful effects. Third, arguments where expertise played a key role in framing Google's technical assistance as value-free while defining priorities worldwide, in claiming authoritative power because of Google's leadership and societal impact, and in calling for coordinated efforts in AI governance, where other actors' expertise matters to show possible outcomes as an apolitical result of coordination. These discursive strategies have some distinctive features:

First, *the battle for legitimation binds Google's discursive strategies*. Each strategy aims to legitimize Google's activities and consolidate its power, revealing Google's power-oriented motivation (Stiller, 2010) to engage in discursive battles. Although Sundar's public discourse depicts him as a leader oriented toward policies (ibid.), instead of being concerned about his power as an individual, his arguments pursue the establishment of Google's power to influence other actors' interests. In other words, Sundar's ideational leadership drives Google's ideational leadership in the public arena. Normalizing worldviews and the potential of AI, among other elements, has legitimizing power, as it explains how the tech giant's vision is credible and reasonable. If Google is a credible actor, the other stakeholders in the discursive battle have motivations to accept Google's discourse and back down or stand still on the battlefield.

Similarly, positioning Google's arguments through the personality of Sundar Pichai generates closeness with the public. This closeness legitimizes the company, and this legitimacy feeds imaginaries regarding Google's ethical position and recognition of the need to develop AI responsibly, once again persuading the actors to let Google lead them because they are *knowledgeable*. Expertise is used as a source of authoritative power, based on the same logic and depoliticizing effects. If "common sense"-based and leader-centric strategies assert legitimacy mainly through normative arguments, expertise is the cognitive argument *per se* to consolidate Google's ideational dominance. A dominance that is shrinking and reallocating the *fora* for political deliberation of AI, since the broader Google's reach and ideational dominance, the narrower the influence of other actors. Essentially, through the search for and consolidation of legitimacy, Google exerts ideational power to distance other actors from discursive battlefields.

Next, *Google's ideational power relies on a persuasion triad in which self-representation plays a key role*. While expertise is essential in depoliticizing AI, it is not the exclusive motivation that Google uses to persuade people's beliefs, which could be the first intuition about Google's strategies, as its existence and dominance are based on technical expertise. The other discursive strategies ("common sense"-based and leader-centric) are embedded in technological solutionism and the profile of experts, but these appeal to other dimensions with the same ideational power as expertise: ideas resonating with shared principles and the influence of the worldview of an ideational leader. Regarding the latter, the results suggest that ideational elements for self-representation matter in the exercise of power through ideas. An argument is considered relevant for its cognitive and normative elements as well as for the representation of the actor communicating it.

Interestingly, the types of discursive strategies for depoliticization reflect the modes of persuasion described in the Aristotelic tradition: *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos*. While Sundar appeals

to normative and cognitive arguments, his leader-centric strategies appeal to emotions through personal experiences and attitudes; and these three elements are cohesive and deeply intertwined. For instance, Sundar explained (CNN Business, 2019) that he did not have much technology in his life, and when he and his family did, their lives changed (emotional argument). These experiences inspired him to facilitate access to technology for other people *as it should* (normative argument), and Google's expertise can provide services and products to achieve this goal (cognitive argument). Each argument strengthens the persuasiveness of the strategy as a whole and justifies the ideas that Google wants to disseminate.

Finally, *Google's discourse is intertextual and context-dependent*. This analysis sheds light on the relevance of the context for developing persuasive discursive strategies. In Google's case, the depoliticization of AI relied on depoliticized issues in the past: technological development as an unstoppable phenomenon, its relationship with economic growth and innovation, capitalist values, and global governance. These ideas and worldviews appear to have been inserted into the collective consciousness and are embraced as factual by most people. The case illustrates how this context shapes the contents of discursive strategies to maintain or change meaning in interpretative contests (Willers, 2021).

The content in the video interviews sheds light on Google's interest in persuading the public perception of its self-representation: definitions, values, and interests, which are intended to consolidate Google as a legitimate actor since its narratives resonate with societal expectations. As observed in the strategies, legitimation is a driver of AI's depoliticization, because it intensifies Google's ideational power. The more credible Google is, the more reach it has to influence other actors' opinions and beliefs toward depoliticized AI development. The results also showed the interdependence of each type of discursive strategy, indicating that Google's ideational power for the depoliticization of AI lies in the cohesion of these three categories. Each appeal to a dimension that complements the others, and all three are informed by Google's self-representation and interrelationships with other discourses.

Overall, this thesis has provided some insights into the underexplored topic of discursive strategies used by powerful private actors such as Google, contributing to discursive institutionalism (DI) scholarship and fields interested in the politics of Big Tech, the ideational dimension of AI, the narratives legitimizing it, and their potential effects on the definition of progress people accept and normalize. Despite the limitations explained previously (See Chapter 4), the findings can help construct relevant causal explanations in future research and represent empirical arguments to shape people's critical resistance. Ideas constituting discursive strategies exist to promote an agenda and not as a result of nature. Thus, these results are reasons for people

to recover their roles as citizens, defining what is best for them instead of seeing themselves as passive users waiting for the next product launch. More than ever, people must react because AI threats are already occurring and new risks have been predicted. However, the existence of discursive strategies to depoliticize AI reminds us that artificial intelligence is not a faceless supernatural force. The destructive power of AI, as well as its potential, relies on humans, who have the power to disrupt and change exploitative structures or to keep reinforcing the *status quo* by protecting it through ideational power mechanisms.

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