



The Emerging Post-Network Society and the Language Model as Social Form

Robert Diab¹

Received: 15 April 2026 / Accepted: 20 May 2026
© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2026

Abstract

The rapid uptake of artificial intelligence worldwide is ushering a shift from apps and the web to the language model as the primary interface of digital life. This is bringing about a deeper transformation that has been underexplored in the burgeoning literature on the socio-economic impact of generative AI — a shift from a ‘network society’ to one of delegated automation; a move from a political economy of flows and collaboration, of platform dominance and ordinality, to one that prizes powers of orchestration and computation. This Brief Communication traces the outlines of this shift by drawing a contrast with earlier macro-societal assessments of earlier stages of digital technology in the work of Manuel Castells, Yochai Benkler, Nick Srnicek, and Marion Fourcade and Kieran Healy. The contrast elucidates an unfolding turn from a preoccupation with platform hegemony to concentrations of power over the AI stack, and its implications for autonomy, democracy, and social order.

Keywords AI · Language model · Social form · Social theory

1 Introduction

AI adoption worldwide remains relatively low at present, but as recent surveys indicate, uptake is rapidly increasing. One study from the Reuters Institute at Oxford conducted in six countries on four continents found that weekly use of AI doubled in 2025 from 18 to 34% of those surveyed (Simon et al., 2025). Other studies in the US, the UK, and Canada have found that a majority of adults and almost all students make regular use of AI for a host of tasks, from search to planning and writing (Future, 2025, KPMG, 2025). With major platforms adopting or expanding their implementa-

✉ Robert Diab
rdiab@tru.ca

¹ Faculty of Law, Thompson Rivers University, Kamloops, British Columbia, Canada

tion of AI, through features like Google's AI Overviews, ChatGPT's integration of third-party apps, and the imminent release of an improved Apple Intelligence, AI is becoming the primary interface in our digital lives.

Critical and policy commentary on AI's impact has been extensive, exploring what AI means for education, work, health care, and government; how AI should be contained, regulated, fostered, and so on. But as we move from apps and the web to the model as our new paradigm of computing, a deeper societal shift is unfolding — and a body of theory has yet to appear venturing an assessment of generative AI's impact on a macro-social scale.

I have in mind here a theory comparable in scope to earlier assessments of the 'network,' 'platform,' or more recently 'ordinal society' (Castells 2010a, b, c [1995]; Srnicek 2016; Fourcade & Healy 2024). The wait for a macro-theory is perhaps due to how recently and rapidly the relevant developments in generative AI are unfolding. The change at issue may turn out not to be of comparable significance on a society-wide scale to these earlier developments. But in ways to be canvassed here, there are reasons to think that generative AI will bring about profound and distinct social transformations — and that it has begun to do so.

I do not propose in this Brief Communication to advance the macro-social theory I anticipate. I aim instead to offer a glimpse of a higher-order perspective coming into view at present. I do this by drawing a contrast with earlier assessments of how aspects of digital technology fostered salient new social formations, in works by Manuel Castells, Yochai Benkler, Nick Srnicek, and Marion Fourcade and Kieran Healy.

I foreground three observations. In the three decades in which the world wide web has catalyzed a broad-scale socio-economic reordering, the focus of value and concern has involved ideas about networking and connection, with an emphasis on the need to foster the linking of people and institutions. My argument will be that AI is ushering in a shift to an economy and social order in which value will be derived increasingly from forms of delegation and automation — whether it be information gathering, content creation, or a myriad of other automatable tasks. As trite as it may seem to assert this, its import has yet to be grasped: more of our time will be spent interfacing with language models and automated assistants rather than with human interlocutors over a network. More power than before will concentrate not in centralizing platforms like Google or Amazon or on social media, but in monopolies over chip production and data processing. These will not be marginal developments in much of the world rapidly onboarding AI and they will have meaningful consequences for autonomy, equality, and democracy.

2 Earlier Macro-Social Theories of the Digital

To grasp the depth of the transformation underway, it helps to revisit four key works on societal-level changes brought about by digital technology in the age of the web. In his pioneering "Information Age" trilogy, Manuel Castells mapped large swaths of the shifting terrain by exploring how power and production were operating in the broadest senses according to new logics of all-encompassing information net-

works (Castells 1996, 1997, 1998 [second editions 2010]). In *The Wealth of Networks* (2006), Yochai Benkler described a transformation ushered by an emerging economy of peer-to-peer collaboration and open-sharing that created new forms of freedom and value. In *Platform Capitalism* (2016), Nick Srnicek foregrounded how major platforms were becoming hegemonic forces by combining network effects, big data, and infrastructural dominance. And most recently, Marion Fourcade and Kieran Healy, in *The Ordinal Society* (2024), have argued for the primacy of ordinality — the continuous positioning of people, groups, and institutions in ranked hierarchies and other forms of digitally enabled differentiation. The emerging post-network, post-platform, and post-ordinal society that AI is bringing about will mark a break with these frameworks in ways we can begin to discern by noting distinguishing features of these earlier paradigms.

For Castells, writing in the late-1990s and 2000s, digital networks had quickly become the defining architecture of global capitalism. The network had come to replace the institution as the key social form, notable for being flexible and decentralized, and massively scalable. Power would concentrate among those who could build large networks, shaping a “space of flows” that superseded an older “space of places” (Castells 2010a, b, c [1996] ch 6). People and organizations were linked across boundaries in a relentless campaign to connect everything, driven by a fear of being marginalized through disconnection. Information technology had transformed society into an ever-expanding web of relationships mediated by communication, thereby reordering everything from labour to politics to identity. Value here was maximized in connecting and sharing rather than in automating or delegating.

A central idea for Benkler in *The Wealth of Networks* was that the internet had become the foundation of an economy increasingly shaped by commons-based peer production (Benkler, 2006). Digital networks lowered barriers to entry, allowing individuals to create and share outside markets and hierarchical arrangements. Important features of the early culture of the web, such as open-source software, Wikipedia, and blogs, felt empowering and subversive in being driven by voluntary collaboration rather than profit. They exemplified new social forms that democratized knowledge and creative production, and helped to shape a landscape in which information became both a primary public good and a means of dispersing political power among peers. In Benkler’s vision, political economy in the age of the network had become a self-organizing, cooperative ecosystem in which communication and collaboration were vital sources of social value. In ways to be explored below, the primacy of automation emerging at present threatens to devalue cooperation or divert attention from it, fostering in its place a greater emphasis on mediation through (or delegation to) language models and other forms of AI.

Nick Srnicek’s contribution to this lineage reflects a widely shared concern through the 2010’s with the concentration of power among large online platforms and their impact on capitalism itself. Another work to include here would be Shoshana Zuboff’s *Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019), which borrowed in fruitful ways from Polanyi’s *Great Transformation* (2001 [1944]) to explore the extractive and exploitive dimensions of platform dominance involving “behavioral surplus” (Zuboff, 2019). But Srnicek’s book was important for highlighting more basic facets of platform power that have become so pervasive in their effects as to be overlooked

now: how platforms became central economic actors by serving as primary mediators across markets and institutions; how they do so on monopolistic and rent-extracting or parasitic terms; how they create protective moats by requiring massive amounts of data and compute, with which few other entities — governmental or commercial — can compete; and how these structures of dominance and exploitation have come to shape labour and social life in the broadest senses (Srnicsek, 2016). Much of this analysis can be carried over to the present, but with the proviso that AI companies are coming to replace some of the earlier major platforms as the next infrastructural monopolies, or the new operating layer of social and economic life.

More recently, Fourcade and Healy have seized upon the salience of ordinality, or the way in which digital systems generate fine-grained distinctions, such as taste profiles or reputation scores, to order society in terms of hierarchies and discretely quantifiable differences. This has led to new patterns of governance and economic activity, ranging from access to opportunities and pricing to social and political visibility. Ordinality heightens the importance of our relational positioning or the way we perceive ourselves or make value judgments by looking at where we stand relative to others in a constantly ranked field (Fourcade & Healy, 2024). Datafication and algorithmic comparison now structure much of our social lives and sensibility. But while the ordinal society may capture a late-network formation, there are signs that AI will make delegation more important than ranking, as comparative judgments come to be superseded by automated decision-making and task execution.

These various works chart a course in the evolution of salient features of the digital society, in a process that is closer to sedimentation — to new layers of social reality being added — rather than a sequence in which one ordering replaces another. Each phase here identifies a dominant organizing logic of its moment. But AI is introducing a novel logic, one that turns less on connection, platform dominance, or ranking and more on managerial control and automated mediation. The core development here is a shift from systems that shape or exploit human interaction and behavior to ones that increasingly offer substitutes for them.

3 Outlines of a Society of (Generative) Automation

The emphasis that Castells placed on “spaces of flows,” encompassing the global circulation of information and capital through networks, is beginning to seem outdated. AI is shifting the focus of our attention to what might be called ‘spaces of computation’ that enable the automation of more of what we do — data centres, chip manufacturing plants, model training and inference. More of our personal agency is being replaced by machine agency; more of what we do involves expressing an intention and having a system execute it. While connection remains important, and perhaps always will, it is becoming more a substrate for automation than our primary means of engagement.

And while for Benkler, peer-production relied on open collaboration and a shared informational commons, AI draws on the commons — training on a vast corpus of text and art — with the aim of capturing it in proprietary models. The ideal of shared labour is giving way to ever-broader practices of automated extraction. The com-

mons is becoming enclosed; corporations are appropriating the knowledge that was built through networks (Wikipedia, the web itself) for systems that automate its use for profit (AI summaries, content creation). Human creativity may have provided fuel for the model along the lines Benkler outlined, but the model is replacing human collaboration as the primary site of productivity.

The network society fostered a sense of empowerment through participation. AI, by contrast, privileges something approximating orchestration, or the skill of directing agents to make automated decisions. As we make more frequent and varied use of AI, we are likely to begin associating autonomy with the ability to prompt or delegate effectively, rather than to work collaboratively. We may also come to think of digital literacy differently; less as a matter of knowing how to navigate the web or process information and more in terms of expertise in how to direct a machine to do so. The democratic promise of networks — however illusory it may have been — is also being displaced by a new dynamic involving the managerial relation between user and system, a relation likely to become ubiquitous due to its convenience but one we will also find increasingly isolating.

AI is also doing something interesting to platform capitalism. AI does not simply continue the dominance of platforms but displaces their power further down the stack to model providers, data centres, and chip fabricators. It shifts the emphasis from intermediation to computation. We see evidence of this in the pivot from earlier concerns about platform governance of the web through ownership of the interface and data pipelines (by Google, Amazon, Facebook before it became Meta) to a present concern with the powers and risks posed by model providers and semiconductor monopolies (Nvidia, TSMC). We read more headlines these days about breakthroughs or obstacles in model training and access to GPUs than about control over user networks. The concern at the time Srnicek was writing was that users depended on platforms for vital forms of connection and visibility; in the emerging dispensation, dependence has begun to center on access to intelligent agents and more powerful models and capabilities. Rather than hosting interactions or mediating human relationships, we are glimpsing a possible future in which AI systems replace much of this interaction altogether. The impact may be more profound. Platforms structured markets and public conversations, but the large players in AI will do more to shape the way we think and exercise judgment, effecting a far deeper form of mediation.

The shift of focus from apps and the web to the language model also raises the possibility that we may soon be diverted from our current obsession with ranking and ordination. Ranking has been crucial in the age of the algorithm, where computers helped us choose among copious options or make comparisons across large bodies of data. We use generative AI systems, by contrast, not so much to evaluate options than to carry out defined actions and tasks. Rather than choose the songs or podcasts I will like from a database, AI will produce the music or content I prompt it to create. Visibility and ranking, which shaped opportunities in the ordinal society, will conceivably become less important when more of what we do comes to be mediated by agents that plan or transact on our behalf — that process information in more complex ways than rankings or comparisons.

Moving forward, more will turn not on where you rank but on differences in the capabilities of the AI to which you have access: model quality, degree of integration

with your data, and so on. How you rank may become less important than how you delegate, and what is lost when you do so may become a greater concern than what happens through relentless ranking.

4 Social Theory on the Horizon

Once again, AI is not likely to erase patterns and structures that took shape in earlier moments of digital culture — networks, platforms, ordinality — but will sediment on top of them. Yet it does appear likely that AI will displace these patterns in meaningful ways. A new organizing logic is emerging that lends greater import to the managerial relation between user and machine, displacing collaboration and connection. Automation and computation are eclipsing intermediation and ordinality. All of this makes it seem inevitable that we will see multiple attempts to grapple with the language model as a social form; to see it not as a neutral tool but an environment that shapes more of our agency and social ordering.

Conversations about the digital will likely continue to shift focus from themes of connection and data capture, ranking and visibility, to concerns about substitution and competence. And if so, certain questions we have begun to ask will only become more pressing: can we have a functioning public sphere with so much information and discourse filtered by agents? Can we foster solidarity when so much collaboration is mediated without inter-personal engagement? Can democracy and self-government thrive — or even survive — if citizens are more often beneficiaries of automated decision-making than co-participants?

It may turn out that the emerging AI society is not a fifth chapter in the story but the opening of a second volume, comparable in magnitude to the birth of the network or digital society itself. In this early phase, we need theories as ambitious as those of Castells, Benkler, and others canvassed here. We need a more accurate picture of how ubiquitous embedding of automated delegation will reshape class and inequality, how the AI stack will reconfigure political economy at a global scale, and how AI will alter subjectivity and political judgment. I have a conditional hope that AI's capacity for delegation and mediation can be harnessed to strengthen networks and publics rather than replace them, but only if we learn to recognize the risks of substitution early enough.

Acknowledgements The author does not seek to include an acknowledgement.

Funding Not applicable.

Data Availability This essay does not analyse or generate any datasets.

Declarations

Competing Interests The author has no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article. No funds, grants, or other support was received.

References

- Benkler, Y. (2006). *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*. Yale University Press.
- Castells, M. (2010a/1998). *End of Millennium* (2nd ed.). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Castells, M. (2010b/1997). *The Power of Identity* (2nd ed.). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Castells, M. (2010c/1996). *The Rise of the Network Society* (2nd ed.). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Fourcade, M., & Healy, K. (2024). *The Ordinal Society*. Harvard University Press.
- Future, P. L. C. (2025). *The AI Tipping Point*. Future PLC.
- KPMG (2025). *Generative AI Boom Among Canadian Students Raises Dilemmas*. KPMG Canada.
- Polanyi, K. (2001/1944). *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*. Beacon Press.
- Simon, F., Nielsen, R. K., & Fletcher, R. (2025). *Generative AI and News Report 2025: How People Think About AI's Role in Journalism and Society*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.
- Srnicsek, N. (2016). *Platform Capitalism*. Polity Press.
- Zuboff, S. (2019). *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. PublicAffairs.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.