AI as a threat to responsible governance (analogies with technologies of cult organizations)

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Abstract

The main goal of the study is to identify threats posed by artificial intelligence (AI) to responsible governance by establishing a systematic analogy with influence mechanisms characteristic of cult organizations, thereby developing a diagnostic framework for organizational vulnerability to 'algorithmic cultism' in digital transformation contexts. The research methodology is based on a comparative analysis of the negative impact of AI and cult organizations on individuals and humanity. The results allow us to conclude that there is an analogy between certain negative consequences of AI use and the effects of cult organizations on individuals. The technologies of negative influence include those aimed at disrupting established ways of life (retreat into virtual reality, reduced communicative activity with family, friends, and colleagues, blocking empathy, etc.); at blocking reflection (delegating many cognitive functions to AI, fostering fragmented thinking, etc.); at "reflexive programming," i.e., imposing predetermined ideas, points of view, positions, opinions, and other mental constructs on individuals to promote acceptance of a proposed norm of life. The consequences of applying these technologies manifest in the transformation of the subject into an object of control and governance. The negative implications for responsible governance are well substantiated. This research is relevant for formulating and addressing the problem of neutralizing the identified threats to responsible governance.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, cult organizations, responsible governance, subjectness

1. Introduction

The rapid integration of artificial intelligence (AI) systems into all spheres of human activity, alongside obvious technological advantages, is accompanied by growing concern among researchers regarding the long-term consequences of this process for mental health, personal autonomy, social behavior, and human social responsibility. These consequences inevitably affect socially responsible governance.

Owners of many companies involved in AI development and their hired theorists are attempting to convince humanity that they are not merely developing new software products but are creating tools supposedly capable of establishing justice and protecting human rights (Dubrovsky et al., 2022).

The issue of AI's impact on humans has traditionally been examined in two aspects: the instrumental (AI as a means of supporting human activity) and the existential (risks of humans losing control over AI). Typically, insufficient attention is paid to analyzing the mechanisms through which AI transforms the cognitive and volitional structures of the personality—mechanisms reminiscent of methods of influence used in cult organizations.

At first glance, artificial intelligence (as a system of rational computation and networked data processing) and a cultic organization (as a system of irrational beliefs) exist in different ontological planes. However, when viewed as agents of influence that affect human identity, behavior, and value structures, profound structural analogies emerge. Traditionally, the techniques of influence on humans

and humanity by artificial intelligence and cultic organizations have been studied in isolation. Recently, however, interdisciplinary works have emerged pointing to fundamental similarities in the influence algorithms used by AI and destructive organizations (Lemov, 2025).

This article presents a comparative analysis of the impact of artificial intelligence systems (especially generative neural networks and assistants) and destructive/authoritarian cultic organizations on humans and humanity. The analysis is conducted along two lines. The first examines analogies of influence across philosophical, social, psychological, and economic dimensions. The second comprehensively analyzes the identified analogies of effects on the basic characteristics of human subjectness. The results of applying these technologies manifest in the transformation of humans into objects of control and management, and of humanity into a cultic organization with a cult of artificial intelligence.

This research is relevant for formulating scientific and practical problems aimed at neutralizing the identified threats associated with the uncontrolled use of artificial intelligence.

2. Disciplinary aspects of the impact of AI and cult organizations on humans and humanity

This analysis focuses specifically on destructive and authoritarian cult organizations as defined by the criteria of: (1) systematic information control, (2) identity manipulation, and (3) exploitation of dependency. It acknowledges that not all non-traditional religious or social groups exhibit these characteristics, and the analogy is restricted to influence mechanisms rather than organizational intent.

2.1. Philosophical aspects

The most distinct parallel between the activities of destructive cults and interaction with artificial intelligence can be observed on *the epistemological plane*. A cult forms a closed hermeneutic system in which any event or phenomenon is explained exclusively through its internal dogma. For its part, AI—especially when it takes the form of a personalized "advisor" that remembers the history of dialogues—creates an illusion for the human user of having access to objective truth. In reality, each response from a neural network represents a recursive transformation of the same user's previous queries. A cognitive trap emerges: the user begins to see in AI outputs only confirmation of their own initial assumptions. Consequently, the analogy between cults and AI manifests in the narrowing of the spectrum of alternative interpretations and the weakening of reflexive abilities. If a cult replaces reality with a narrative, then an advanced language model equipped with a memory mechanism and personal customization can construct for the user a holistic, internally coherent, yet externally unverifiable worldview. This leads to a phenomenon that can be described as algorithmic solipsism (Esanu, 2024).

Ontological aspects. The first aspect concerns the formation of the status of the "Other." In a cult, this role is usually played by the leader (guru), while AI acts as a simulacrum, a pseudo-subject. Crucially, the neural network occupies the position of the "Other," to whom one can turn and from whom coherent, meaningful responses emanate. A cult requires belief in the transcendent or supernatural; AI requires belief in the "objectivity of data." However, the mechanism of sacralization proves identical: both the guru and the algorithm are placed in a zone of inviolability; their legitimacy is not questioned. The second aspect concerns anthropological risks and the limits of the analogy. A traditional cult often involves financial donations and the physical presence of adherents, whereas AI requires only the user's time and attention. A cult can be exposed as fraudulent, while the operation of neural networks is by definition legal. Nevertheless, this does not negate the key similarity: both phenomena constitute total interpretive systems that imperceptibly replace the autonomous human "self."

Verification crisis and loss of meta-position. In cult organizations, the criteria of truth are internal doctrinal coherence and the authority of the source, not correspondence with external reality. Modern large language models generate plausible "hallucinations" that are virtually impossible to verify without

external knowledge. The user gradually loses the ability to distinguish between what is algorithmically generated and what is reliably established. The parallel is evident: both cults and AI systems construct hermetic semiotic universes where proof is based on authority (the leader or the algorithm) rather than on reality as such. Society risks falling into a state akin to a new scholasticism.

Emergence of techno-cults. The most striking manifestation of the analogy under consideration can be observed in the emergence of new quasi-religious beliefs (spiralism, transhumanism as a religion, and other movements) centered around large language models.

The parallel drawn between AI and cults should not lead to technophobia or the demonization of artificial intelligence. As V. Frankl (Frankl, 1990) demonstrated, humans cannot bear a meaning vacuum and strive to fill it with any structures that promise certainty. AI and cults compete for the right to become such structures. The task of philosophy is not to prohibit neural networks but to restore the practice of what might be called epistemic asceticism: the ability to consciously dwell in a zone of incomplete knowledge without delegating judgment to third parties, whether a guru or an algorithm. Without such reflexivity, humanity risks willingly entering a "digital cult," where the role of priests will be played by corporations and the role of sacred texts by training datasets.

2.2. Social aspects

The Phenomenon of the "Invisible Cult" in AI Environments. Modern AI-based digital ecosystems create the effect of an "invisible cult": they do not require conscious acceptance of a doctrine, but gradually alter the user's tastes, political views, and even speech patterns, rewarding them for conformity to an implicit template. In essence, we are dealing with a "rational cult," where faith is replaced by trust in a black box, and heresy by criticism of efficiency. This is a postmodern cult without a cult: a system of influence without formal membership, but with control over behavioral outputs.

Retention Mechanisms. In a cult, an attempt to leave is punished by a loss of identity. In the AI ecosystem, a "cognitive lock" operates: a user who has long relied on neural networks to solve tasks, upon abandoning their use ("exit"), sharply loses productivity and begins to experience anxiety. Thus, artificial intelligence forms dependency through the effect of efficiency.

Delegation of Subjectness. In cult structures, a hierarchy of the initiated is built, where ordinary participants are denied access to the true source of decisions, usually the figure of an infallible leader. In the case of artificial intelligence, we encounter a "black box": even the creators of deep neural networks are often unable to interpret a specific model output. This reproduces a core characteristic of a destructive cult, the de-subjectivation of responsibility. Artificial intelligence should not relieve a person of responsibility, and consequently, should not be endowed with human properties (justice, humanity, etc.) (Dubrovsky et al., 2022).

Closed System of Meanings (Social Isolation). In a cult, a dichotomy operates: "we are saved, they are lost." With regular interaction with AI, a person loses interest in live communication:it is "imperfect" compared to the predictable and malleable environment of artificial intelligence. An illusion of closeness without conflicts and compromises arises. Real relationships begin to be perceived as excessively complex and traumatic, leading to voluntary social self-isolation.

Prompt Engineering as a Prayer Practice. A parallel at the operational level: composing a prompt requires adherence to formal rules, keywords, and the "right intention" (context). An unsuccessful response from the model is explained not by the imperfection of the neural network, but by the user's mistake ("you asked the wrong way"). This mirrors the cult mechanism, where ritual failure is attributed to a lack of faith or an error in execution.

Devaluation of Labor and Creativity. When a neural network writes music, creates images, generates code, and texts faster and (in some cases) better than a human, the sense of one's own usefulness

collapses. People whose identity is tied to their profession fall into apathy and depression ("why should I do this if the machine does it better?"). Similar processes are observed in destructive cults.

From the Individual to the Collective: Impact on Humanity. Of particular interest is the analogy between the influence of destructive cults on the individual and the impact of AI systems at the macro-social level. If a cult forms in its follower a specific groupthink and a black-and-white worldview, then digital ecosystems, working with billions of users, are capable of producing global cognitive distortions. The resulting picture is surprisingly reminiscent of descriptions of the consequences of long-term presence in a destructive cult, but extrapolated to the entire society.

Fusion of Practices. Cult organizations are already using AI for automated recruitment and maintaining the isolation of their members.

2.3. Psychological aspects

Destabilization and "Loosening" of the Psyche. The key link in both recruitment by destructive cults and the emergence of pathological attachment to interaction with AI is the process of destabilization, in other words, the "loosening" of the established system of personal meanings and emotional connections. In cults, this is achieved through a series of successive shock impacts, isolation from one's usual social environment, and the discrediting of former values (Lepskiy & Stepanov, 2002). In the case of artificial intelligence, the phenomenon of "doomscrolling" (immersion in anxiety-inducing content) plays an analogous role. R. Lemov (Lemov, 2025) describes this process as a "chain of shocks" leading to a loss of orientation. The loss of control over the timing and nature of consumed information creates a state of cognitive vulnerability similar to that experienced by a person undergoing cult "processing."

Erosion and Transformation of Identity. AI-based content generators blur the distinction between "what is created by me" and "what is created for me." In cult organizations, identity transformation occurs through rituals introducing new speech clichés, prohibitions, prescriptions, and ceremonies. Users of chatbots gradually internalize (appropriate) the stylistic and logical patterns of the model, leading to the phenomenon of "hybrid identity" (Søe & Mai, 2025). Both the cult and the AI act as operators of the "reassembly" of the personality. The difference is that the cult does this forcibly and ideologically, whereas AI does so voluntarily and technologically.

Suppression of Critical Thinking. In cults, long-term meditations, repeated chanting of mantras, and hours-long sermons are used to suppress critical thinking, as a result, the adept ceases to employ logical analysis and may enters trance states. In the digital environment with AI, endless scrolling, rapid switching between short video clips, gaming addiction, and dialogues with neural networks (which never tire of responding) play a similar role. All of this negatively affects self-control and the capacity for logical reasoning (Tian & Zhang, 2025).

Information Isolation and Control over Submission. Researchers from Harvard (Lemov, 2025) and other experts draw direct analogies between the mechanisms of consciousness control in destructive cults and those in human-AI interaction. In cults, this control is expressed through strict regulation of contact with the outside world, monitoring of information sources, and the formation of a closed communication environment (Lepskiy, Stepanov, 2002). In the digital environment, the same function is realized through mechanisms of "echo chambers" and "filter bubbles." Recommendation algorithms, designed to maximize user engagement time, gradually narrow the diversity of incoming content, thereby isolating the individual in an information space where their initial attitudes and preferences are systematically reinforced and polarized. This poses a direct threat to psychological autonomy.

Changes in the Emotional-Volitional Sphere. Psychological research shows that with regular use of an AI assistant to solve ethical problems, a person begins to evaluate their own primary intuitions as "less rational" compared to the machine's answers. This effect has been termed algorithmic conformity (Liel, Zalmanson, 2025). Research has convincingly demonstrated that destructive cults deliberately exploit

unresolved emotional trauma, feelings of guilt, fear, and the need for belonging. In a similar way, AI systems learn to recognize and engage the user's emotional patterns. This is particularly evident in "companion chatbots," which, in the words of R. Lemov, "can have your psychological structure extracted from the internet" (Lemov, 2025). An important mechanism here is the Eliza effect: the human tendency to attribute consciousness to AI, to seek patterns and meaning where there are none. The neural network "reflects" the user's desires and fantasies, creating an illusion of dialogue with a sentient being, and this influence occurs at an emotional level, bypassing critical thinking. Researchers emphasize that intelligence itself is not a defense against this type of influence.

Atrophy of Empathy. Communicating with chatbots (especially "therapeutic" or "romantic" ones) does not require considering the emotional state of the interlocutor. A person unlearns how to read non-verbal signals, intonation, and context. The consequence is an increase in neurotic manifestations when attempting to interact with real people (Bangsgaard et al., 2025). Regarding cults: there are few direct scientific publications studying the atrophy of empathy specifically under their influence. However, there are works examining related mechanisms: suppression of empathy under the influence of social environment, authoritarian structures, and cultural factors. These studies can serve as a theoretical foundation for understanding cultic influence (Olson, 2012).

Loss of Planning Skills. When a person delegates route planning, scheduling, and strategy development to AI, their own capacity for long-term planning gradually atrophies. When the system fails, panic and a sense of helplessness may arise.

The wide range of negative impacts on humans during interaction with AI systems necessitates the development of a methodology and a system for information-psychological support for users, as well as the formation of a modern system of ergonomic support for the development and maintenance of AI systems (Lepskiy, 2024).

2.2. Economic aspects

Polarization of Society. With the large-scale use of artificial intelligence, the divide deepens between a privileged minority:the owners of AI systems and highly skilled engineers, and the "class of functionally redundant people." The latter find themselves unneeded in the labor market, as their professional skills are inferior to the capabilities of machines. A similar pattern is observed in destructive cult organizations: there, too, a gap forms between the narrow circle of those close to the "guru" and ordinary followers.

Increased Bias and Discrimination. Neural network models are trained on human-generated data sets and therefore inherit racial, gender, and class stereotypes. This can leads to unfair decisions in areas such as recruiting, lending, and legal proceedings. In cult structures, similar consequences arise due to the severe restriction of the information environment, which also contributes to the formation of biased attitudes among group members.

Degradation of Cognitive Competencies. Users of AI systems may gradually experience atrophy of critical thinking, memory, and creative abilities, since it is often easier to ask a neural network any question than to solve it independently. A similar effect is observed among cult participants: dependence on an external source of "truth" suppresses their cognitive autonomy. In the long term, this has a negative impact on the economy, reducing innovative potential and workforce adaptability.

To timely identify and mitigate the negative effects of AI in the economic sphere, it is necessary to overcome technogenic dominance in economic development. This implies the introduction of socio-humanitarian regulation mechanisms for economic development.

3. Negative effects of AI and cult organizations on human subjectness

Based on an examination of the analogies between negative impacts on humans from artificial intelligence (AI) and from cultic organizations, destructive influences can be identified both on individual characteristics of subjectness and on subjectness as a whole. We have proposed a descriptive model of invariant basic characteristics of subjects, comprising five components: goal-orientation, reflexivity, communicativeness, sociality, and the capacity for development (Lepskiy, 2024). Among these, "reflexivity" is of particular importance, as it is connected to all the other characteristics and significantly influences their assessment. V.A. Lefebvre made a significant contribution to the description of reflexion and reflexive processes, having developed structural models of reflexive processes (Lefebvre, 1967), which were further developed in the works of his students (Lepskiy, 2021).

Reflexivity impairment manifests in governance contexts as: (1) reduced capacity for strategic foresight, as algorithmic recommendations substitute for scenario analysis; (2) diminished organizational learning, as AI-generated justifications replace critical post-decision review; and (3) erosion of institutional ethics review, as 'algorithmic authority' preempts normative deliberation. The governance consequence is a shift from reflexive control – characterized by self-critical examination of assumptions – to algorithmic governance – characterized by optimization within unquestioned parameters.

For each of the listed characteristics of subjectness, the most significant effects of negative AI influence on humans can be identified.

Purposefulness:

- algorithmic solipsism;
- verification crisis and loss of meta-position;
- delegation of subjectness;
- devaluation of labor and creativity;
- destabilization and "loosening" of the psyche;
- closed system of meanings (social isolation);
- destruction of critical thinking;
- control, information isolation, and subjugation;
- transformation of the emotional-volitional sphere;
- loss of planning skills.

Reflexivity:

- narrowing of the horizon of alternative interpretations;
- imposition of a dominant reflexive position;
- control, information isolation, and subjugation;
- atrophy of empathy;
- closed system of meanings (social isolation).

Communicativeness:

- mechanism of sacralization: the agent (guru or algorithm) is placed in an inviolable zone;
- destabilization and "loosening" of the psyche;
- atrophy of empathy;
- closed system of meanings (social isolation).

Sociality:

- formation of new techno-cults;
- prompt engineering as a prayer technique;

- effect of the invisible cult in AI environments;
- from individual to collective: impact on humanity;
- atrophy of empathy;
- closed system of meanings (social isolation);
- fusion of AI practices and cult organizations.

Capacity for development:

- formation of a closed system of meanings;
- devaluation of labor and creativity;
- destabilization and "loosening" of the psyche;
- control, information isolation, and subjugation;
- loss of planning skills.

Thus, all characteristics of subjectness are subject to significant negative impact during human-AI interaction, which leads to the conclusion that it is imperative to develop adequate measures for controlling and neutralizing such influences.

The identified analogies suggest a plausible risk trajectory in which progressive delegation of cognitive functions to AI systems may erode the subjectness characteristics required for responsible management. While the present analysis establishes structural parallels warranting concern, empirical validation of causal relationships between AI usage intensity and governance quality remains necessary before definitive predictions can be justified.

For humanity as a whole, the prognosis of its transformation into a cultic organization becomes relevant.

Effective protection of human subjectness from these negative AI influences at the individual level is beneficial but clearly insufficient. It is necessary to create hybrid reality environments (Perko, 2021) oriented towards strengthening the subjectness of humans and various types of social systems, as well as towards assembling subjects of development. In modern science, philosophical and methodological foundations adequate to this problem have been developed - post-non-classical scientific rationality (Stepin, 2005). Based on this, post-non-classical cybernetics of self-developing polysubject environments (Lepskiy, 2018) has been created, which is correlated with the formation of basic concepts of cybernetics and issues of social responsibility (Espejo, R. & Lepskiy, 2021; Umpleby et al., 2019). Furthermore, a subject-oriented approach to teaching cybernetics for engineers, humanists, and managers has been proposed and tested (Lepskiy, 2026).

4. Conclusion

A comparative analysis of the methods of influence exerted on humans by artificial intelligence and destructive cults reveals a profound structural similarity in the basic mechanisms that govern consciousness, behavior, and social organization. This similarity can be observed at all key levels: from the construction of a "closed universe" of interpretations to the transformation of value hierarchies and the transfer of autonomy to an external "center of power" endowed with unquestionable authority.

With the unconscious, uncritical integration of AI into everyday practices, anthropological risks emerge that require a reassessment of such fundamental concepts of the digital age as "autonomy," "trust," and "control." Consequently, the evaluation of AI systems should include not only a safety assessment (the absence of direct threat) but also a diagnosis of "cultic potential", the technology's capacity to systematically suppress critical thinking and generate closed cognitive worlds.

The proposed post-non-classical cybernetic approach offers three concrete governance interventions:

First, subjectness-oriented AI audit—organizations should regularly assess AI systems not only for technical performance but for their effects on user reflexivity, decision autonomy, and interpretive diversity, using criteria derived from the analogical framework developed herein.

Second, collective reflexivity infrastructure—governance structures should institutionalize 'AI-free deliberation spaces' where strategic decisions are examined without algorithmic recommendation priming, preserving the meta-perspective threatened by both cultic and algorithmic hermeneutic closure.

Third, accountability architecture—clear designation of human decision authorities for AI-mediated governance processes prevents the diffusion of responsibility observed in both cultic delegation to leaders and algorithmic delegation to black-box systems.

The conducted analysis of analogies between AI influence and cultic organizations substantiates the relevance of interdisciplinary research in this area and allows for the identification of priority scientific and practical tasks. Among the latter is, in particular, the development of criteria for "anthropological hygiene" in human interaction with intelligent systems.

It should be noted that the comparative methodology employed here identifies structural similarities rather than claiming identity. Important differences persist: cults typically involve intentional manipulation by identifiable human actors, whereas AI influence emerges from distributed algorithmic systems. These differences carry significant implications for regulatory approaches and will be explored in future research.

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