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Artificial Intelligence and Social Transformation: Digital Inequality, Algorithmic Governance, Social Inclusion, and Human Agency

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ABSTRACT

Artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly influencing social institutions, governance, education, healthcare, public services, and everyday decision-making. Its expansion creates opportunities for innovation and inclusion while also raising concerns about inequality, algorithmic power, exclusion, and human autonomy. This review synthesizes current evidence on AI-driven social transformation, with particular emphasis on digital inequality, algorithmic governance, social inclusion, and human agency. A comprehensive review was conducted using relevant literature identified through Google Scholar, the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), and ScienceDirect. Studies addressing the social, ethical, institutional, and governance dimensions of AI were screened and organized thematically into sociotechnical transformation, digital inequality, algorithmic governance, social inclusion and exclusion, human agency, and emerging trends. The review found that AI can improve service delivery, institutional efficiency, access to information, and social participation. However, unequal access, AI literacy gaps, data underrepresentation, and algorithmic bias can reinforce existing inequalities. Algorithmic governance also creates challenges related to transparency, accountability, fairness, and institutional power. Inclusive outcomes depend on participatory governance, representative systems, and meaningful human oversight. Socially sustainable AI requires equitable access, accountable governance, inclusive design, and protection of human agency. Future research should examine long-term, cross-context, and measurable social impacts of AI.

Keywords: *Artificial intelligence; Social transformation; Digital inequality; Algorithmic governance; Human agency*

1. Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) can no longer be considered just a technological gadget, as it now plays a big part in socially transforming our world. Its uses today impact communications, the job market, education, health care, government, organizational decision-making and information access. These advances are transforming the way institution's function, and people interact with both public and private institutions. From a sociotechnical point of view, the introduction of AI as a change agent is not just a reflection of computational change, but also of change in social relationships, institutional practices and organizational structures (Selgas-Cors, 2025). AI can also support social innovation by providing new ways to deliver services, to solve social problems, and to coordinate social institutions; however, this depends on how technological systems are implemented in the broader social landscape (Calzada, 2024).

In addition to inequality concerns, the rise of AI has also intensified inequality concerns. Traditional digital inequality was tied to access to online networks, technology and devices, and digital literacy, while AI adds other dimensions like access to powerful systems, how data is represented and processed by algorithms and the capacity to gain advantage from automation. An increasing focus of sociological discussions is on the ability of AI to amplify or exacerbate existing inequalities in social contexts where technologies are introduced (Zajko, 2022). Technological progress is hence not necessarily equitable, and in a world where AI is increasingly becoming part of everyday life, groups that are less well equipped when it comes to digital resources may be even more disadvantaged (Dinker, 2024). Further, in more recent studies, the unequal distribution of values has been understood to be embedded in the technology, through data, design decisions, and institutional arrangements that are based on social inequalities (Bircan & Özbilgin, 2025). Another key aspect of AI transformative growth is the rise of algorithmic governance. AI is now being used in the administration of governments and institutions to help with administration, service delivery, classification, prediction and decision-making. While these applications have the potential to enhance efficiency and responsiveness, they also raise issues of transparency, accountability, privacy, fairness, and institutional responsibility (Fan, 2025). Algorithmic systems can pose a special concern when they are hard to explain or when they produce biased results that have an impact on access to opportunities and public services. Another example of algorithmic bias affecting institutional decision-making is within automated justice, where algorithms might exacerbate social disadvantage (Mardikaningsih & Oluwatoyin, 2023). Critical governance perspectives of AI consequently focus on the importance of considering not only the functioning of the technologies, but also the power dynamics and social structures that are shaped by algorithmic applications (Hassen, 2025).

AI, however, has significant potential for contributing to social inclusion. Intelligent systems can be used in support of access to education, health services, information, public services and community engagement, especially when the design of the technologies is based on different social needs. However, inclusive AI calls for more than just making technology accessible. To ensure that AI is used for the interest of the general public and not for exclusion, participative governance, stakeholder engagement, and consideration for social impact are crucial (Moon, 2023). The same applies to cities, where digital inclusion should be integrated into planning and policies for AI-enabled cities to have a positive impact on socially diverse populations (Calzada & Eizaguirre, 2025). All of this evokes significant issues of human agency, autonomy and control. AI systems are now shaping recommendations, decisions and institutional policies, which could open up new avenues for help and support for individuals, but also place them in a growing reliance on AI processes. Social equity aspects of automation thus encompass access to automation technology as well as the capacity to maintain meaningful participation, choice and influence over decisions that impact upon their lives (Judijanto et al., 2025).

Although there are more and more research, digital inequality, algorithmic governance, social inclusion and human agency are often analyzed as distinct issues. To grasp the interplay of these aspects and their interaction within larger processes of AI-based social change, a more integrated approach is required. This review, therefore, collates current evidence from these interwoven themes and examines trends, the key problems and future research directions.

2. Methodology

This study aims to conduct a comprehensive review of the existing scholarly evidence on artificial intelligence and social transformation, focusing the concept of social transformation on digital inequality,

algorithmic governance, social inclusion and human agency. Peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, book chapters and scholarly reports from Google Scholar, Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) and ScienceDirect were identified as relevant literature. The review concentrated on studies that investigate the social, ethical, institutional and governance aspects of artificial intelligence, excluding studies that were not related to societal impact and/or lacked relevance to the review themes. A structured keyword strategy was used with a combination of keywords such as artificial intelligence, social transformation, digital inequality, algorithmic governance, social inclusion, algorithmic bias, human agency, autonomy, digital divide and AI governance. Studies retrieved in the first step were then screened to ensure their thematic relevance before being grouped by key themes such as sociotechnical transformation, digital inequality, algorithmic governance and accountability, social inclusion/exclusion, human agency and control, and emerging trends. The synthesis process consisted of comparing and integrating the results of these themes to look for patterns, key issues and new directions in the literature. The overall review process, such as literature identification, screening, thematic classification and synthesis is shown in Figure 1.

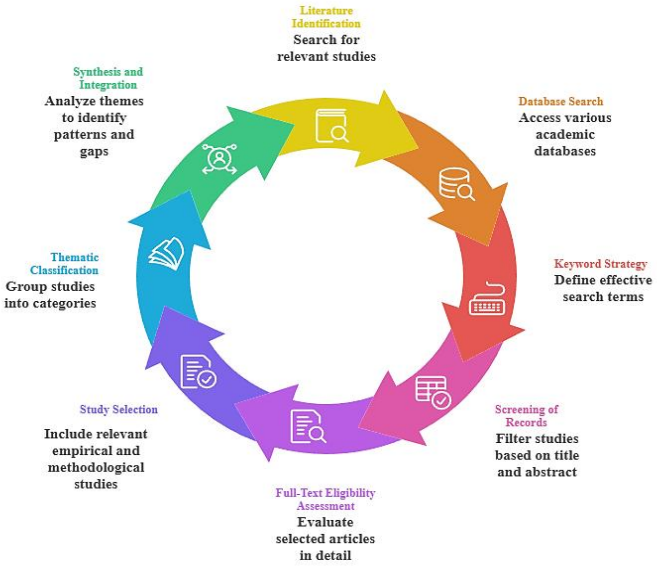


Figure 1. Overview of the Comprehensive Review Process

3. Results

3.1 Artificial Intelligence and Sociotechnical Transformation

AI is reshaping society in regards to institutions, jobs, communication, social services, and social interaction. Beyond technology efficiency, AI is increasingly integrated into decision making, resource allocation, knowledge creation and organisation processes, with a significant impact. These will affect relationships between people and institutions and between technological systems and in turn will impact access to information and decision-making power. While AI transformation can provide opportunities for innovation and better service delivery, social impact will vary based on the design, governance, and embedding of technologies in social systems. Some of the major dimensions and implications of these changes are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Major Dimensions of AI-Driven Social Transformation

Dimension	Role of AI	Main Social Effect	Supporting Evidence
Institutional transformation	Automation and data-driven processes	Changes in organizational and institutional structures	Boyd and Holton (2018); Selgas-Cors (2025)
Social innovation	AI-enabled solutions to societal challenges	New approaches to social problem-solving	Calzada (2024)
Employment transformation	Automation and intelligent systems	Changes in work, employment, and economic power	Boyd and Holton (2018)
Sociotechnical	Integration of	Changing relationships	Sartori and Theodorou

relations	humans and intelligent technologies	between technology and society	(2022)
Power structures	Control over algorithms, information, and data	Redistribution of institutional and social influence	Vladimir (2025)
Justice-oriented transformation	AI embedded within social structures	Greater attention to justice and inclusion	Kour and Yadav (2026)

3.2 Digital Inequality and the Algorithmic Divide

The digital divide is growing more intricate with the introduction of AI generating disparities beyond traditional gaps in internet and device access. AI-related inequality may stem from disparities in access to AI technologies, disparities in digital and AI literacy, bias in training data, and biased algorithmic results. Lutz, 2019, pointed the relevance of AI and big data as extensions of the current digital inequalities, and Yu, 2020, identified an algorithmic divide, where opportunities could progressively rely on interaction with automated systems. Carter et al. (2020) found that traditional digital divides intersect with adoption of AI. Social, digital and data exclusion can be self-reinforcing, if disadvantaged groups continue to be underrepresented in technological systems (Park & Humphry, 2019). AI can then perpetuate existing structural inequalities instead of merely adding new technological inequalities (Bircan & Özbilgin, 2025). These inequalities can also be manifested in specific ways, such as age-based exclusion (Stypinska, 2023) and differential educational access and engagement to AI (Bulathwela et al., 2024). Figure 2 depicts the pathways through which the existing digital inequality is translated into AI-related inequalities and broader social implications.

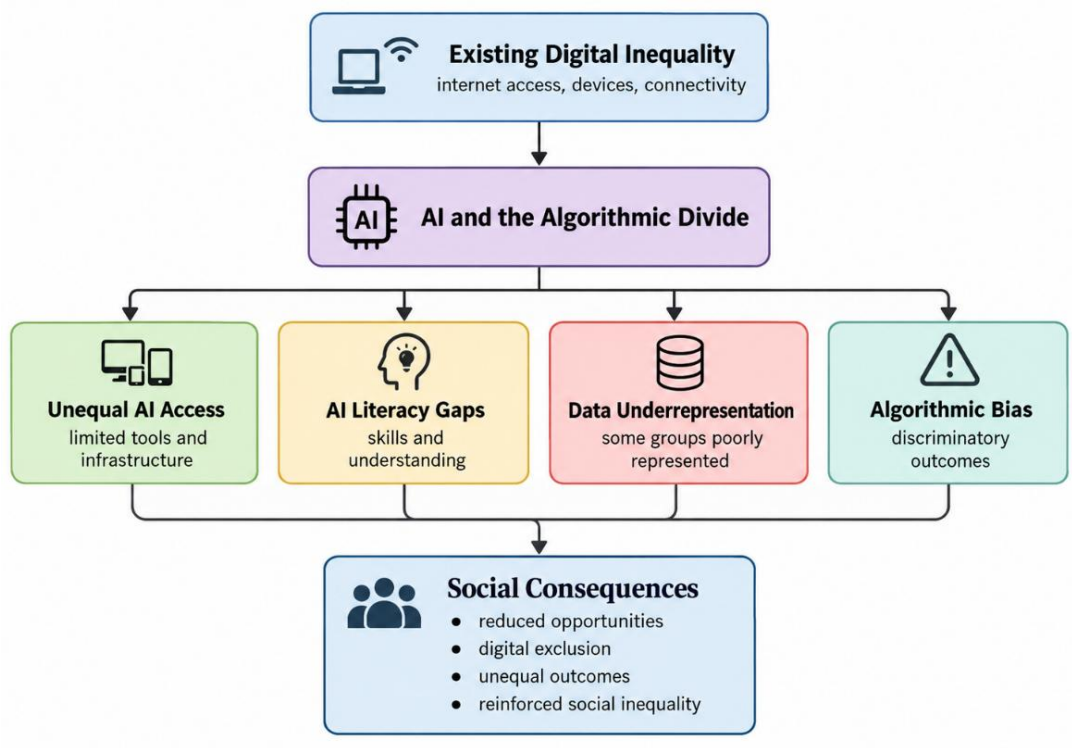


Figure 2. Digital Inequality and the Algorithmic Divide

The figure illustrates five pathways to exclusion, unequal opportunities and perpetuated social inequality: unequal access, AI literacy gaps, data underrepresentation, and algorithmic bias.

3.3 Algorithmic Governance, Power, and Accountability

Algorithmic governance has become a significant part of the current public and institutional decision-making processes. AI systems are now playing a more significant role in the filtering and categorization of information, the allocation of resources, and the decision-making process in administration. While such

apps can help to increase efficiency, consistency, and responsiveness, they also pose questions of transparency, fairness, accountability, and institutional responsibility. With increasing algorithmic power, there is a potential shift in the dynamics between citizens and institutions, especially when algorithmic decisions are hard to comprehend or challenge. Effective governance thus needs mechanisms of explainable, human oversight and citizen participation and institutional accountability. Table 2 shows the most important governance dimensions and related societal problems found in the literature.

Table 2. Core Dimensions and Social Challenges of Algorithmic Governance

Governance Dimension	Potential Role of AI	Main Social Concern	Supporting Evidence
Algorithmic regulation	Automated coordination and classification	Opacity and limited accountability	Katzenbach and Ulbricht (2019)
Algorithmic selection	Filtering and prioritization of information	Construction of social realities	Just and Latzer (2017)
Public-sector AI	Improved government decision-making and services	Ethical and accountability challenges	Fan (2025)
AI and inequality	Governance within unequal social contexts	Reinforcement of structural disparities	Gehl Sampath (2021)
Participatory governance	Citizen and stakeholder involvement	Weak representation when participation is limited	Moon (2023)
Automated justice	AI-supported institutional decisions	Bias and fairness concerns	Mardikaningsih and Oluwatoyin (2023)
Critical AI governance	Regulation of socially consequential AI	Concentration of technological power	Hassen (2025)

3.4 Artificial Intelligence, Social Inclusion, and Exclusion

The potential of AI for social inclusion is the capacity to provide access to education, healthcare, public services, information and community engagement, but these are not automatic. The key elements to achieve inclusive outcomes are accessibility, Digital Skills, Representative Data, Institutional Support, and meaningful engagement of affected populations. By engaging citizens and stakeholders in decision-making processes, participatory governance can help to enhance the social inclusiveness of AI. Participatory governance can contribute to the social inclusiveness of AI by involving citizens and stakeholders in the decision-making process (Moon, 2023). Digital transformation can also enhance the accessibility of marginalised groups in the provision of public services, but technological and governance challenges can hinder participation (Djatmiko et al., 2025). The question of inclusion is also relevant in the context of urban AI, where it needs to be incorporated into policy and planning approaches (Calzada & Eizaguirre, 2025). AI can also offer support to health equity, provided that systems are designed with underserved populations in mind (Osonuga et al., 2025) and co-creation can enhance the relevance of interventions to health inequities (Morgan & Cogan, 2025). However, AI cannot address pre-existing educational and social disparities (Bulathwela et al., 2024; Kopsaj, 2025). The key routes through which AI can foster inclusion or exclusion in social domains are shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3. Artificial Intelligence, Social Inclusion, and Exclusion

The figure illustrates the circular nature of the interplay between access to education, equity in healthcare, provision of public services, participation of community members, barriers and inclusive design as they condition one another in the process of generating AI outcomes that are socially inclusive or exclusionary.

3.5 Human Agency, Autonomy, and Control in AI-Mediated Society

The application of artificial intelligence in everyday decision-making is transforming the nature of human agency, autonomy and control. Although AI can help an individual with recommendations, predictions, information and decision support, increased reliance on AI can also diminish the scope for independent choice. In the case of algorithmic decision-making, in particular, regarding matters of education, employment, health care, welfare, and access to public resources, the importance of human agency will come into play. Individuals should have the chance to comprehend, interrogate and question automated results, rather than be the passive recipients of technological decisions. This requires transparency, contestability, participation, oversight and the clear allocation of responsibility instead of human control. Table 3 provides an overview of the key aspects in which AI can enhance or limit human agency.

Table 3. Dimensions of Human Agency in AI-Mediated Society

Agency Dimension	Potential Contribution of AI	Potential Restriction	Supporting Evidence
Decision-making	Information and analytical support	Dependence on algorithmic recommendations	Sartori and Theodorou (2022)
Autonomy	Expanded informational resources	Reduced independent judgment	Whittlestone et al. (2019)
Human control	Human–AI collaboration	Weakening of meaningful oversight	Sartori and Theodorou (2022)
Participation	Stakeholder involvement in governance	Limited influence over institutional systems	Moon (2023)
Accountability	Shared decision processes	Unclear responsibility for AI outcomes	Hassen (2025)
Social and legal agency	New human–AI relationships	Blurred boundaries between human and artificial agency	Penner et al. (2026)

3.6 Emerging Trends in AI and Social Transformation

The new trends in artificial intelligence are participation, inclusion, social justice and preservation of human control. Now, the emphasis is moving away from technology-driven adoption and toward strategies that take into account how AI can be shaped and regulated to meet society's needs. There is also increased focus on democratising access to AI and minimising structural inequalities and digital exclusion in multiple ways. Meanwhile, the growing levels of autonomy of AI systems pose new challenges for accountability and responsibility, and the limits of interaction between humans and AI systems. These developments can be seen as the wider trend towards more participatory, socially responsive, and human-centred AI systems, as summarised in Table 4.

Table 4. Emerging Trends in AI and Social Transformation

Emerging Trend	Key Development	Social Significance	Supporting Evidence
Participatory AI	Greater citizen and stakeholder involvement	More socially responsive AI development	Moon (2023); Morgan and Cogan (2025)
Democratization of AI	Wider access to and participation in AI	More equitable distribution of technological benefits	Chan and Nurrosyidah (2025)
Justice-centered AI	Shift toward structural inequality and social justice	Greater attention to fairness and inclusion	Bircan and Özbilgin (2025); Kour and Yadav (2026)
Intersectional digital inequality	Recognition of overlapping disadvantages	More nuanced understanding of AI-related exclusion	Stypinska (2023); Zabala et al. (2026)
Human-centered AI	Greater emphasis on human oversight	Protection of autonomy and meaningful control	Sartori and Theodorou (2022)
Emerging AI agency	Increasing autonomy of intelligent systems	New questions concerning responsibility and legal/social subjectivity	Penner et al. (2026)

4. Discussion

The conclusions derived from this review signal that there are a number of pathways and not a single technological pathway that are connected to social transformation and that artificial intelligence is contributing to social transformation through these pathways. The results demonstrate that AI is transforming institutional practices, institutional decision-making, access to services, social participation, and power dynamics. At the same time, the benefits of AI are not evenly shared. Algorithmic bias, equal access, and variations in digital literacy play a role in determining who can reap the benefits and who can be left behind when it comes to AI. It is therefore recommended that artificial intelligence (AI)-powered social transformation is best seen as a sociotechnical process, in which technologies capabilities engage with prevailing social systems, institutional arrangements and inequalities.

One of the key conclusions from the study is that the traditional "digital divide" is becoming a more general "algorithmic divide". The results indicate that access to devices and connectivity are also essential, but they also show that how data are represented, AI literacy, access to advanced systems, and the ability to contest and understand automated decisions are also key areas of participation in an AI mediated society. This is in line with Imran (2023), who posits that digital inequality requires to be recognized as a social priority since unequal access to digital resources can deepen a broader spectrum of inequalities. This also aligns with George (2024) who argues that digital transformation has human implications if it is not equally accessible in terms of access, skills and technology.

The results in the area of education also show that equality does not necessarily result from the availability of technology. AI can support broadening access and personalization, but digital inequality in terms of digital skills, infrastructure and institutional support might pose risks of sustaining inequalities in education. Similar to Mac Fadden et al. (2024)'s science-mapping study, from a sociological point of view, the trend

between the use of AI in education and digital inequality is increasing. The current review does not just focus on education; it demonstrates that similar trends can be observed in the sector of healthcare, public services, governance and participation in the community. The other key discovery is related to algorithmic governance. The review outlines how AI can improve and ease the efficiency and consistency of institutional decision making, but also how it may contribute to a blurring of transparency and lack of clarity over accountability. These concerns align with those raised by Kumar et al. (2024), who have pinpointed various ethical issues related to digital transformation and AI, including social implications, responsibility, and fairness. These findings suggest that institutions employing AI should include explainability, human oversight, and effective means to challenge results of AI. The results also demonstrate that thinking in terms of public needs and not only about the technical performance can create results of social innovation and inclusion with the support of AI. The interpretation is in line with that of George and George (2024) who see the emerging technologies as potentially crucial elements of a "socially innovative and highly connected" Society 5.0, yet also identify some of the associated challenges. Based on the findings of the present review, it is concluded that inclusive outcomes are reliant on participatory governance and accessible design, representative data, and the ongoing presence of human actors.

The results have policy and practice implications. It is essential that AI inclusion is seen as a social and technological goal for governments, educational systems, healthcare systems and other organisations. Investment, therefore, needs to be at the same time focused on infrastructure, on AI literacy, on transparency, accountability and participation. Human oversight should continue to be particularly important when AI systems impact access to critical services or opportunities.

This review also is subject to limitations. The comprehensive review design and does not use the more rigorous screening, quality appraisal and meta-analytic approach that is found in systematic reviews. The selected literature also covers a number of sectors and social situations and it is not possible to make a direct comparison across studies. Long-term social impacts of AI should be, therefore, explored in longitudinal and cross-country research, inequalities by various demographic groups should be examined, and measurable metrics of algorithmic inclusion, human agency and participatory governance should be developed. There is also a need for further empirical studies to find the most appropriate governance model to achieve the balance between technological innovation and equity, accountability, and substantive human control.

5. Conclusion

This review reveals that AI is emerging as one of the key levers of social change, affecting institutions, governance, education, health, jobs, public services, and social life. The key findings indicate that AI has the potential to foster innovation, enhance service provision, boost access to information, and empower participation – albeit in an uneven manner. Digital inequalities are becoming more complex and are morphing into algorithmic inequalities driven by access and exposure to biased automated systems, literacy with AI and data representation. The review also mentions "algorithmically-driven governance" that has come into the forefront through the use of AI in decision-making for increased efficiency but has also raised concerns about transparency, accountability, fairness and institutional power. An important finding is that AI and social inclusion are two sided phenomena. AI can facilitate access to education, healthcare and other services but if it is not designed in an accessible manner, it can further marginalize already marginalized communities. Responsible AI transformation thus should always be a matter of human agency. In order to maintain autonomy and public trust, there needs to be meaningful participation, contestability, human oversight and clear accountability. Recent trends also show a trend of a participatory, justice-centred and humanistic AI. To conclude, social sustainability in the use of AI will require an approach that takes a holistic approach beyond technological innovation, that also involves inclusive governance, equitable access, representative datasets, institutional accountability, and keeping humans in control.

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