Reimagining AI Conference Mission Statements to Promote Inclusion in the Emerging Institutional Field of AI

Abstract— *AI conferences play a crucial role in education by providing a platform for knowledge sharing, networking, and collaboration, shaping the future of AI research and applications, and informing curricula and teaching practices. This work-in-progress, innovative practice paper presents preliminary findings from textual analysis of mission statements from select artificial intelligence (AI) conferences to uncover information gaps and opportunities that hinder inclusivity and accessibility in the emerging institutional field of AI. By examining language and focus, we identify potential barriers to entry for individuals interested in the AI domain, including educators, researchers, practitioners, and students from underrepresented groups. Our paper employs the use of the Language as Symbolic Action (LSA) framework [1] to reveal information gaps in areas such as no explicit emphasis on DEI, undefined promises of business and personal empowerment and power, and occasional elitism. These preliminary findings uncover opportunities for improvement, including the need for more inclusive language, an explicit commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, clearer communications about conference goals and expectations, and emphasis on strategies to address power imbalances and promote equal opportunities for participation. The impact of our work is bi-fold: 1) we demonstrate preliminary results from using the Language as Symbolic Action framework to text-analysis of mission statements, and 2) our preliminary findings will be valuable to the education community in understanding gaps in current AI conferences and consequently, outreach. Our work is thus of practical use for conference organizers, engineering and CS educators and other AI-related domains, researchers, and the broader AI community. Our paper highlights the need for more intentional and inclusive conference design to foster a diverse and vibrant community and community of AI professionals. By addressing these information gaps and opportunities, collectively the community can foster a more inclusive and accessible environment for all individuals interested in AI, promoting innovation, collaboration, and progress in the field.*

Keywords— Mission statements, AI, AI conferences, Engineering education, Language as Symbolic Action (LSA) framework, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

I. Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) conferences play a vital role in advancing the field. In his thesis on the discursive formation of emerging organizational fields, Lo Verso [1] finds that regulators and entrepreneurs in a field will benefit from forming relationships together, improving on aspects related to both better regulation and more fit-to-purpose technology. As "field-configuring events", Lampel and Meyer [2] found that such events: 1) “assemble in one location actors from diverse professional, organizational, and geographical backgrounds. 2) are of limited duration, normally running from a few hours to a few days. 3)provide unstructured opportunities for face-to-face social interaction 4) include ceremonial and dramaturgical activities. 5) are occasions for information exchange and collective sense-making. 6) generate social and reputational resources that can be deployed elsewhere and for other purposes.” In his work on how AI technologies are legitimized and institutionalized, Larsen [3], underlines the importance of field-level interactions in the development of institutional responses to AI, in particular to limit negative externalization and to support appropriate regulatory and technical decision-making. The mission statements of leading AI conferences highlight their role as platforms where researchers, students, and

practitioners can exchange knowledge, display innovations, and collaborate on advanced projects. These conferences are essential for bringing together diverse stakeholders, significantly influencing the direction of AI research, education, and development. Additionally, they provide a crucial platform for policymakers to gauge current advancements and identify areas requiring further attention and regulatory oversight. Despite this, a growing body of research [4] suggests that significant information gaps and limitations in inclusivity exist within many AI conferences.

This paper uses the Language as Symbolic Action framework [5] to report preliminary results from a textual analysis of AI conference mission statements, and to systematically analyze the current state of inclusivity within leading AI conferences, identify persistent challenges, and propose a framework for the design of more accessible, equitable, and diverse event experiences. We review conference mission statements to understand the discipline's often-stated commitment to fostering diverse, equitable, and accessible events. By acknowledging and addressing these critical issues and explicitly stating them in mission and vision statements, the AI community can ensure that its premier forums for the dispersion of AI knowledge truly reflect the vibrant and multifaceted nature of the field.

II. Mission statements indicate information gaps and barriers to inclusion

In the engineering education space, prior related work on mission statements for colleges of engineering found that the choice of language used in U.S. based college of engineering mission statements barely vary across institutions, with the focus largely centered around the term innovation [6], [7], [8]. Analyzing mission statements can thus have a profound impact on fostering a culture of inclusion, starting with recognizing that engineering schools and the profession can be unwelcoming, masculine, and authoritarian [9], [10], [11], [12], [13], [14]. This endeavor can propel reforms, setting the tone for the organization's commitment to DEI. By explicitly stating a dedication to inclusivity, mission statements may also help create a sense of belonging among underrepresented groups and encourage diverse perspectives and promote equal opportunities for all stakeholders [15]. Inclusive mission statements can also help organizations attract and retain top talent [6] consequently contributing to a more just and equitable society. By tying mission statements to inclusion, organizations can ensure that their purposes and values align with the process of maintaining a diverse and vibrant field, driving positive change and meaningful progress [15].

We extend the above argument and posit that researching AI conference mission statements is similarly essential, as they can provide valuable insights into the conference's priorities, values, and goals. Analyzing text from conference mission statements can reveal trends, patterns, and areas for improvement, enabling conference organizers to refine their purpose and better serve their audience. For instance, examining mission statements can help confirm prior research [16], [17] that elaborate on gaps in inclusivity and diversity in AI, overemphasis/underemphasis on technical aspects, potentially marginalizing non-technical attendees, as well as lack of coherent or clear objectives, leading to unclear expectations and outcomes, and consequently reducing contributions to the broader community. This knowledge can inform strategic decisions, drive positive change, and enhance conference experiences. As the conference landscape evolves, this

research can empower organizers to ensure that events remain pertinent, inclusive, diverse, and relevant to the research community.

III. Methods

The Language as Symbolic Action (LSA) framework posits that language is not merely a tool for conveying information but a symbolic means of taking action in the world [5]. This perspective, developed by philosopher Kenneth Burke, views language as a form of social action that shapes our perceptions, constructs our reality, and influences others [18]. According to LSA, language is a strategic resource used to achieve goals, manage relationships, and create identities [19]. By examining language as symbolic action, researchers can uncover the underlying motivations, power dynamics, and social structures that shape communication and meaning-making processes. The language used to promote AI conferences in the public arena is also part of what symbolically shapes the field of interrelated organizations and individuals involved in or potentially affected by AI.

Our method for selecting conferences was to include conferences we are familiar with as AI researchers, students, and academics ourselves, consult curated lists of conferences from multiple sources, and finally, to search google and LinkedIn. We determined that we had begun to reach topic saturation when new lists began to slow in providing new conferences. However, this process provided coverage of trade conferences, but has not yet yielded coverage on academic nor policy conferences. In terms of thematic coverage, the current conferences gathered do indicate full coverage for the themes detailed in the following section. By applying a critical thematic analysis and frameworks from different new institutionalisms [20], [21], [22] to conference mission statements and a deeper rhetorical analysis of statements from selected conferences recognized as some of the most influential conferences in the field, we hope to gain a deeper understanding of the symbolic actions, strategies, and field dynamics at play. This understanding will enable us to propose refining language and messaging to achieve desired goals and values within the field of AI and for individual conferences.

IV. Preliminary results - Beginning to reimagine AI conferences for inclusion

Concerned with the power of language to symbolically shape AI, and as a result of an investigation that encompassed fictional and non-fictional media, [23] concluded that “in the anglophone West, the prospect of intelligent machines is often portrayed in tones of great optimism or equally great pessimism” (p. 74). However, in a different scenario - AI conferences- our results add new evidence on how hyperbole pervades the field. This analysis identifies this and other shortcomings, with follow-up work to be done to propose solutions to create a more inclusive and diverse AI conference landscape. Our preliminary work-in-progress findings reveal several potential insights.

A. Commonalities

Many conferences use ideas from business such as marketing language, empowerment narratives, business disruption as a virtue, and aspirational futurism. As such, they do not seem explicitly exclusionary. However, in terms of understanding the field, what is missing from a field’s rhetoric is as interesting, if not more so, than what may be present.

B. No explicit DEI

There appears to be an almost universal lack of explicit commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in mission statements. Only a few conferences mention DEI initiatives explicitly, and even then, they are often relegated to a secondary statement or webpage. This marginalization perpetuates the notion that DEI is an afterthought rather than an integral, functional component of a conference's purpose. Consequently, the AI community may inadvertently exclude individuals from underrepresented groups or with diverse perspectives. This finding is consistent with previous investigations of marketing AI applications [24].

C. Promises of power

We found there to be repeated use of language indicating personal empowerment and business empowerment with AI, with a futurist bent for undefined promises, especially but not exclusively for non-academic AI conferences. The questions posed by EMTech Digital, the signature MIT Tech Review conference on AI, include these questions in their conference mission [24]: How can we harness the power of generative AI?, How will AI impact the workforce, competitiveness, and democracy?, and What's beyond Generative AI? What are the model makers working on in their labs? Questions such as these may not seem at first glance to be exclusionary. However, a closer examination of mission statements from 60 AI conferences reveals significant information gaps and barriers to inclusion: a negative space defined by what is missing from the message.

D. Elitism

The conference statements and descriptions often try to evoke excitement and anticipation by appealing to a sense of exceptionality. For example, the World AI Cannes Festival [25] is described as a "premier event" that brings together "influential AI strategists and innovators to explore the vibrant future of AI." Terms like "exceptional talks," "performances," and "prestigious" are used to create a sense of exclusivity and significance, appealing to the audience's desire to be part of an elite group of professionals shaping the future of AI. Similarly, the AI Summit New York [26] is positioned as an opportunity to "explore, network, and learn from AI pioneers." The AI Hardware & Edge AI Summit [27] employs an emotional appeal by emphasizing the "comprehensive coverage" and "state-of-the-art topics,"

Globally influential participants are a hallmark of conferences such as the World AI Summit [28] and AI Everything x Gitex [29]. The World AI Summit attracts a wide audience, including enterprises, big tech, startups, investors, scientists, C-suite executives, professors, students, data scientists, and software engineers. This wide audience and prominence of participants highlight the event's elite status, bringing together influential figures from the AI ecosystem worldwide. Further enhancing this exceptionalist stance, events frequently have tiered, costly access levels to round-table discussion and working groups. Other examples of elitism in the language used include 1) bringing conference goers together "to direct further development" [30], 2) using of words like " strategic", "cutting-edge", "globally renowned", "eminent" and "premier" [28], [31], [32]; and 3) stating that conference speakers or attendees are "at the fore-front" or that the conference will "accelerate productivity and innovation" [28], [33], [34], [35].

Together, these elements form a structure that is exclusive and exclusionary. Garvey and Marskal [36] asked a supplementary question: “will the AI community’s attempts to ameliorate public concerns and rectify the ‘trust crisis’ allow for critical approaches to technology assessment or remain constrained to narrowly framed market efficiency arguments?” (p. 287). We will address this in our proposals once we have finished gathering the data.

V. Limitations and future work

In this study of AI conference mission statements and their impact on inclusivity, several limitations must be acknowledged to enhance the accuracy and applicability of the findings. First, the research might predominantly focus on English-language conferences, potentially omitting significant insights from non-English speaking regions. This language and cultural bias could skew the understanding of global AI conference dynamics and their inclusivity, as cultural nuances and local practices may not be fully captured. Additionally, the AI field's rapid evolution poses a challenge, as themes and priorities at conferences can shift significantly from year to year. This dynamic nature could complicate the tracking of long-term trends and influence, making it difficult to draw definitive conclusions about the impact and effectiveness of mission statement changes over time.

Furthermore, the scope of the initial project was limited, as there are more conferences than we could survey, and there is much more to understand about how mission statements reflect values and how different conferences influence the organizational field of AI.

. Moving forward, we intend to gather data from more conferences: especially more academic conferences and policy conferences, as well as conferences from more places around the world. We also expect to expand the database of conferences in width - getting more topics, geographies, etc. - and also in time and in detail. Specifically, we hope to gather a list of panel topics and speakers from the past 10 years and measure their influence over time. Mapping these influence factors to specific conferences should enable us to target specific conferences or types of conferences for potential remedial actions in the field as well as to inform on which mission statements correlate or inversely correlate to conference influence, helping educators to identify and convey best practices.

VI. Conclusion

Our study highlights the need for AI conferences to improve their accessibility and inclusivity by addressing information gaps in mission statements and other conference-related texts. Preliminary findings indicate that by providing clearer definitions, introductory content, and more diverse themes, conference organizers and educators can better serve the growing interest in AI and promote a more inclusive community. This research will support instructors of engineering classrooms by providing insights into current gaps in AI education and conferences, and in recommending pragmatic and pedagogy-backed information to students interested in engaging with the interdisciplinary field of AI. Additionally, increasing the visibility of these conferences through broader outreach and media coverage can attract a more diverse participant base, ensuring a wider dissemination of AI knowledge and ideas. The findings from our study can also inform the development of more inclusive and accessible AI course materials, tutorials, and workshops

within AI and engineering classrooms themselves. Ultimately, this paper is a call to action - we believe that by bridging information gaps in AI scholarship, and integrating a wider range of perspectives and voices, we can create a more inclusive and responsible AI community that benefits society as a whole. Our recommendations also extend to policy frameworks, suggesting that conferences could serve as pivotal platforms for shaping future AI regulations and ethical guidelines. Enhanced visibility not only fosters greater inclusivity but also empowers more stakeholders to engage actively in the discourse surrounding AI advancements and challenges.

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