

# How AI Escapes Governance

*Kate McCray – 5/1/26*

*"AI is one of the most important things humanity is working on. It is more profound than, I dunno, electricity or fire."* — Sundar Pichai, Google CEO. 2018.

This was said casually in an interview, but does more deregulatory work than a lobbyist.

When artificial intelligence is framed as an elemental, world-historical force, governance doesn't just become politically difficult, it becomes a categorical error. That framing is not an objective description of reality. It is a narrative constructed, repeated, and refined by the most influential technology giants. Embedded inside those narratives are performances of inevitability and fatalism so consistent they begin to function less like rhetoric and more like fact.

Sam Altman [OpenAI CEO] told ABC News that *"the genie is out of the bottle,"* implying that AI progress cannot be undone or contained and contributing to the narrative that technological progress is an unstoppable, forward force.

As Jensen Huang [NVIDIA CEO] tells world leaders at the 2024 World Government Summit that *"you can't regulate your way to the top — you have to compete your way to the top,"* he is taking a set of corporate investment decisions and recasting them as a competitive race between nations.

Demis Hassabis [DeepMind Technologies CEO] acknowledges AI could be the most beneficial or most harmful technology ever created, then closes with: *"Either way, it's coming."* Real harm is recognized then ignored, and the acknowledgment becomes the resolution. By naming danger and then calling it inevitable, no room is left for actual intervention.

Mark Zuckerberg [Meta CEO] has written that *"the risks of not making AI broadly available far outweigh the risks of making it available."* The framing insists that building is the default, and the real danger is in restraint. Governance becomes not a reasonable response to unchecked power but a source of risk in its own right.

What's notable about these statements isn't any one of them individually, it's their shared architecture.

None of these influential tech giants are arguing against governance explicitly. They are making governance feel out of place before the regulation conversation even starts. Each quote acknowledges risk and then folds that acknowledgment into a frame that precludes governance as a response, so that by the time anyone encounters a specific proposal to regulate AI, they have already been immersed in a cultural vocabulary that treats regulation as a fundamental misreading of what AI is rather than a reasonable response to unchecked power. Risk is named in order to be absorbed into a story about inevitability, and the naming becomes the resolution.

The debate over AI regulation doesn't happen on neutral ground. It happens inside a narrative that tech

companies built that treats governance not as a reasonable position but as a categorical error.

We see this logic made explicit in federal policy. The Trump administration's first AI executive order was titled *Removing Barriers to American Leadership in Artificial Intelligence*. Its December 2025 follow-up declared the goal of achieving global AI dominance through a '*minimally burdensome*' national framework. Governance was not defeated in argument; it was reclassified as an obstacle to be cleared.

To be sure, narrative is not the only mechanism at work. Top tech and AI companies spent more than \$100 million lobbying to shape AI policy in 2025, the first time they crossed that threshold. OpenAI spent \$260,000 on lobbying in 2023, \$1.76 million in 2024, and nearly \$3 million in 2025. Campaign contributions, revolving-door hiring, and raw economic leverage all play their part, but these mechanisms operate inside a cultural narrative that has already determined what counts as a reasonable position and what counts as obstruction on AI governance. There are real-world effects of cultural narratives that become internalized as beliefs, and they are broader and more durable than these material mechanisms.

Two concepts help explain how this works in practice.

I. Cosmology: the underlying logic a culture uses to organize what counts as natural, inevitable, or sacred.

Repeated narratives become cosmologies as they harden into belief. They stop registering as stories anyone told and start registering as either (a) characteristics inherent to the thing being described, or (b) simply *the way things are*.

American culture carries a cosmology of innovation, one in which forward progress is the framework for history and the only kind of progress that is recognized as legitimate. AI slides effortlessly into this worldview, not as a product built by companies with profit motives, but as the next chapter in a story we already believe about what it means to move forward. To question its trajectory is to question progress itself, which in American cultural life is not so much a policy position as a kind of heresy. Marc Andreessen makes this startlingly explicit when he calls AI development "*a moral obligation we have to ourselves, to our children, and to our future*." Once innovation becomes a moral obligation, opposing it is no longer just impractical, it's an un-American failure of faith in the forward motion of progress.

II. Naturalization: the process by which something constructed becomes so embedded in a culture's common sense that it stops feeling like a choice or a power structure and starts feeling simply like the way things are.

What has been naturalized about AI is not any single company's deployment strategy. It is the undoubted assumption that AI progress is coming. It no longer registers as something anyone decided. It registers as something that is happening, in the way that weather happens or markets move, as though the development of artificial intelligence were an essential condition of modern life rather than the product of

specific decisions made by specific people in specific rooms.

The same CEOs quoted above—Pichai, Altman, Huang—are among those people. Their statements are not just descriptions of AI's trajectory, they are actively constructing it.

Even acts of apparent restraint reinforce this; when Anthropic withholds a new model, Mythos, because it is too dangerous to release, the response is largely, and reasonably, celebratory. But whether or not the model should have been built was never in question. Mythos as being *more advanced* (& therefore better) than other models was not in question. Restraint in this context doesn't disrupt the narrative of inevitability; it validates it. Embedded within that validation is a quieter assumption that capability is its own justification, that a more powerful system is, by definition, a better one.

The assumption highlighted in the Mythos example, that more advanced means better, doesn't stay confined to any single product launch. It gets repeated across press releases, keynotes, interviews, and history textbooks until it stops functioning as a claim and becomes ambient.

The word 'innovation' works the same way. It no longer describes a process or a measurable outcome. It has become a self-referential sign: a company is 'innovative' because it says it is, and that word carries a kind of governance immunity (because of the tech narratives) regardless of what is actually being built or who is absorbing the consequences. 'Progress' operates similarly. Both words arrived carrying the felt experience of something good, exciting, and forward moving because they were repeated in that register until the association calcified into common sense.

The narrative structures outlined above are not abstract, they produce material governance outcomes.

## **The Regulatory Sandbox**

The most visible is the regulatory sandbox, a model in which companies are permitted to experiment in real-world environments before any rules are written around them. Eric Schmidt has articulated the logic clearly: "*The way to understand AI regulation is to let the technology play out and then regulate it.*" The reasoning sounds pragmatic, but it quietly adopts the company's timeline, the company's definition of risk, and the company's judgement about what needs to be understood before regulation is applied.

Currently, this reasoning is uniquely tolerated for AI 'innovation'. We do not let pharmaceutical companies distribute drugs and monitor who gets sick. We do not let airlines fly untested aircraft and study the wreckage. The railroad industry operated under a similar logic for decades, celebrated as an unstoppable force of progress, until the Interstate Commerce Act of 1887 arrived after decades of monopoly abuse and exploitation. The fact that "let it play out" still *feels* like pragmatism rather than negligence for AI is itself evidence that the narrative is working.

## **Inversion of the Burden of Proof**

The burden of proof has been inverted alongside this logic. In most regulated industries, companies demonstrate safety before deployment. In AI, individuals and communities are expected to prove harm after the fact in court, often against companies with vastly more resources than those absorbing the consequences. The people with the least power to shape these systems bear the greatest burden of proving they were harmed by them.

## **Performed Accountability**

AI companies establish ethics teams, publish responsible AI frameworks, and issue safety disclosures, producing the visible architecture of accountability without its substance. Timnit Gebru, fired from Google's Ethical AI team in 2020, described the dynamic from the inside: her co-lead had called it "fig leaf cover-up work — like, we're not changing anything, we're just putting a fig leaf on the art." The tobacco industry ran the same playbook for decades, funding its own research and creating internal responsibility frameworks, and using both to delay meaningful regulation for a generation.

The most significant counter-example to this narrative dominance is the European Union's AI Act, the first comprehensive AI regulation by a major governing body. In this case, AI was classified as a regulable technology and rules were successfully written to guide its progress and deployment.

That said, what has happened since the act's passing is more revealing than its passage. The European Commission has proposed deferring high-risk compliance deadlines, and the companies subject to regulation have responded with the same vocabulary this essay has been tracing. Meta called on the EU to "*pause the implementation and enforcement*" of the AI Act, arguing this would provide time for "*meaningful reforms without risking the EU falling behind in the global AI race.*" Google's President of global affairs called the code of practice a "*step in the wrong direction.*" An opinion published in Bloomberg Law stated that "*the EU has now stunted its own AI development*" by jumping "*straight to regulation.*" The framing mirrors the American cosmology exactly: regulation is positioned not as governance but as competitive self-sabotage.

The EU AI Act is a test case of the argument advanced here. A jurisdiction passed comprehensive AI governance, and this act was not met with arguments based on merit, but by recasting regulation as injury.

The regulatory sandbox, the inverted burden of proof, and the performance of accountability are narrative outcomes, not legal or technical ones. The most influential stances are not the ones people argue about in court, they are the ones that have been so thoroughly internalized that they no longer register as positions at all.

This is not an argument that governance is impossible or isn't happening, or that all ethics teams and regulatory frameworks that do exist are purely cosmetic. Some do real, important work. The point is that whatever governance exists operates inside and against a cultural default that was never neutral, one that was constructed through the repetition of specific narratives until those narratives stopped feeling like narratives and started feeling like the real and only description of what AI is. The railroad and tobacco eventually got regulated, but in both cases the narrative had already determined who absorbed the cost of waiting, and the delay was produced by the operating cosmology.

This default narrative is not maintained only at the level of executive statements or federal policy. It reproduces itself in the language people use when they are not thinking about language: when a company frames AI adoption as adaptation and positions skepticism as a failure to keep up, when a manager introduces these tools as a professional necessity rather than a set of products built by companies with profit motives, when someone describes their reliance on these systems as simply how things are done now, as though that were a fact about the world rather than an intentional decision. This is doxa in Bourdieu's sense: what goes without saying, so thoroughly absorbed into common sense that it no longer registers as a position at all. The cosmology reproduces itself most effectively not in any boardroom but in these ordinary moments, in the accumulated texture of how people talk about AI when they are not thinking about how they talk about AI.

This is why governance work, if it is to be meaningful, must also be narrative work. The most effective form of deregulation is not killing a bill. It is making the bill feel unthinkable, constructing a cosmology in which proposing it marks you as someone who doesn't understand what kind of thing you are dealing with.

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