Watching the Train Leave the Station?

A Strategic Action Fields Perspective on AI Field Emergence in Sweden

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Abstract

This thesis examines the emergence of a Swedish AI field through the lens of Strategic Action Field theory. Rather than treating national AI strategy as a fixed policy document, the study conceptualises strategy as an ongoing socially constructed process shaped by interaction, negotiation, and power relations among heterogeneous actors. The empirical material is based on a qualitative case study of the Swedish AI-Commission on its work on the *Roadmap for Sweden*, where 17 semi-structured interviews have been conducted with key actors.

Our findings indicate that a Swedish AI field is currently emerging, driven by the rapid diffusion of generative AI as an exogenous shock that mobilised previously uncoordinated actors. The AI commission functioned as a temporary arena for consensus building, where actors utilized social skills to reach a beneficial settlement. The findings further point to four converging shared understandings that structure the emerging field. At its core, a struggle over resources; statefunding, infrastructure and investment capacity. Power is concentrated among a small set of actors, notably large corporations and highly digitalised public agencies. The rules of engagement are deeply bureaucratic and constrained by formal notions of legitimacy. These dynamics are unified by a collective interpretive frame in which AI is seen both as technically inevitable and existential for Sweden's future competitiveness.

Keywords
Strategic Action Fields, Artificial Intelligence, AI-commission, National AI Strategy, Digital Technologies, Emerging Fields

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The word Artificial Intelligence (AI) can be traced back to 1955, but its modern-day importance relies on entirely new technological breakthroughs, enabling its continued relevance as an emerging technology undergoing immense hype (van Assen et al., 2022; Rotolo et al., 2015; Kotliar, 2025). On a global level, investments in AI continue to rise alongside increased legislation and performance, with USA and China positioned in the lead (Maslej et al., 2025; Panait, 2021). In Europe, many countries have developed national AI strategy documents outlining plans to ensure continued relevance in this accelerating global field (Stan et al., 2025). However, formal strategy texts might not be stable representations of national direction, but rather reflect broader processes of coordination and contestation (Whittington, 1996; Jarzabkowski, 2008; Statskontoret, 2018). This study therefore approaches AI in Sweden as a socially constructed arena of strategic interaction, consistent with Strategic Action Field (SAF) theory (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012).

Importantly, applying SAF theory does not require the assumption that this arena is settled or coherent. Instead, it enables analysis of whether, and how, an order is forming; whether actors are beginning to orient towards each other, establish roles and boundaries, and stabilise coordination through shared understandings of stakes, influence, and legitimate action (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012).

While European, American and Chinese AI strategy appears similar on paper, all outlining the importance of ethical development, the European approach differs in application. Where the latter two invest heavily in innovation and development, Europe tends to emphasize regulation to ensure human rights protection (Panait, 2021; Radu, 2021). Similarly, current literature on national AI strategy focuses on dimensions such as values and ethics, through conducting text-analysis of the official strategic documents (Robinson, 2020; Dexe and Franke, 2020; NíFhaoláin et al., 2020; van Berkel et al., 2020). While valuable, a document-centred approach risks confusing the strategy artifact with enacted strategic direction. SAF instead directs attention to how order is produced and reproduced through ongoing negotiation and coordination among actors, which may diverge from what is formalised in text (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012).

Furthermore, in Sweden, a nation often considered leading within technology, the official strategy is short and outdated (Robinson, 2020). Simultaneously, Swedish businesses are investing billions into continued AI development, and unofficial national strategies are created (Hansson Brusewitz, 2025; AI Sweden, 2025). In 2023, the Swedish Government even appointed a national AI-commission, aiming to create a concrete plan for continued Swedish AI development (Regeringen, 2023).

The Swedish AI-commission was appointed in December 2023, and finalised its work in February 2025. The commission held over 1000 stakeholder consultations, and provided recommendations on topics across the entire public sector. It consisted of experts across Swedish sectors including AI researchers, industry professionals, and government transformation officers. Despite not being an official strategy, the report "Roadmap for Sweden", published in November 2024, was comparable to other AI strategy documents of Nordic countries (Regeringen, 2025). From a field perspective, the roadmap can be treated as an artifact of the commission's coordination process. It shows which issues were prioritised, which positions were treated as legitimate, and how a national direction was framed.

The development of a Swedish approach to AI indicates Sweden's strategic AI direction is better understood as a process than as a single document. The AI-commission's work assembled key actors, prioritised, and produced one national narrative from over 1000 voices. It offers a rare window into how field-level order is attempted through providing a unique insight into how actors are mobilised, priorities negotiated, and shared direction is framed under uncertainty. SAF theory has previously been employed within emerging fields in social enterprises and sustainable transitions, which share key characteristics with AI, such as novelty, fast growth and uncertainty (Rotolo et al., 2015; Maher et al., 2025; Canzler et al., 2017; Lenz, 2025; Kungl and Hess, 2021).

1.2 Purpose and Research Question

Given the rapid evolution of AI, and intensified national coordination efforts, this study aims to examine whether, and how, Swedish AI actors are being organised into an emerging strategic action field. Guided by Strategic Action Field theory, the study utilises the Swedish AI-commission as a case study to illuminate field-level ordering under uncertainty. By

utilising SAF theory, the study views Swedish AI strategy as an ongoing process of negotiation and coordination among heterogeneous actors in a socially constructed arena (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012). In doing so, it extends research on national AI strategies beyond document-centred analyses and contributes an empirical case for action field theory. To guide our research we pose the following question:

RQ: What shapes the emergence and shared understandings of a Swedish AI Field?

1.3 Delimitations

The study focuses on the process behind the AI-commission's roadmap for Sweden's national AI strategy therefore centers Swedish AI actors, even though initiatives further unfold at Nordic, EU, and global levels. The Commission's work is contemporarily relevant and offers clear temporal delineation, making it feasible within the study's limited scope. Moreover, Sweden constitutes an interesting setting for the study of cross-sector coordination in an emerging technology domain, due to its distinctive tradition of collaboration between state and private actors. In addition, while many national AI strategies have been studied, research on Sweden's roadmap remains limited.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Artificial Intelligence and National AI Strategy

Over the last couple of years, the hype around artificial intelligence has been inescapable. Although breakthroughs in generative AI chatbots such as ChatGPT, Gemini, etc., are driving the surge of attention, it is not the first boom, as AI-related enthusiasm can be traced back to as early as the 1960s (Kotliar, 2025). The term artificial intelligence appears in research as far back as the 1970s (Dresher and Hornstein, 1976). While rapid evolution of the technology challenges the relevance of early research, there is a large surge in contemporary studies. Most commonly this research concerns the implementation and implications of AI in different fields, ranging from healthcare (Andersson et al., 2021; Ismali et al., 2025; Irgang et al., 2025), climate (Wang et al., 2025; Kim, 2025), financial services (Pattnaik et al., 2024; Yuniawan et al., 2025), and public sector (Berman et al., 2024; Tangi et al., 2025).

Recently, studies have started to appear of National AI Strategies (NAS) within Europe and the Nordics. When assessing Sweden, these studies utilize the 12 page report “National approach to artificial intelligence” from 2018, through the lenses of culture, values and ethics (Robinson, 2020; Dexe and Franke, 2020; NíFhaoláin et al., 2020; van Berkel et al., 2020; Wilson, 2022; Tucker, 2023). Here, Sweden is found to address trustworthiness (NíFhaoláin et al., 2020), and ethics (Dexe and Franke, 2020; van Berkel et al., 2020; Robinson, 2020) within its strategy. A comparative study on the Artificial Intelligence Landscape in the European Union classified Sweden as a leader within AI usage, stating that leaders “presented strong policies for early digital education, consistent investments, and comprehensive workforce training programs” (Stan et al., 2025). While AI usage is high within Swedish enterprises, conclusions on leadership qualities are likely generalisations from other leading countries, rather than a reflection on Swedish policy and investment. Namely, with its mere 12 page strategy, against Norwegian 67, Danish 74, and Finnish 136 pages, the Swedish NAS is critiqued for being both the shortest document and lacking direction for implementation, with another report stating “The brevity, generality, and vagueness of the Swedish policy guide is concerning, given that Sweden's economy is the largest among the Nordic nations.” (Robinson, 2020).

2.2 Strategic Action Field Theory

Although research on AI Strategy is expanding, the previous section shows existing studies generally remain descriptive, focusing on intentions and ethical commitments rather than how individual actors, interests and shared understandings change or are reproduced. To address these limitations, we turn to Strategic Action Field (SAF) theory. Rooted in earlier field-theoretical work by Bourdieu (1977), and institutional field theory (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), SAF theory was formalised by Fligstein and McAdam (2012) as a meso-level approach to understanding how collective social orders stabilise, transform or come into conflict. Here change is not a linear process, but a field-level social process shaped by incumbents, challengers, governance units and shared understandings of what is at stake (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012).

While SAF theory has to our knowledge not been applied to AI, it has been utilized in adjacent domains such as digital transformation (DT). DT is a broad term that encompasses both digitisation and digitalisation (Bumann and Peter, 2019). Peter et al. (2020) show that

DT in Swiss organisations is structured through multiple overlapping strategic action fields, each shaped by shared understandings of technologies, strategic priorities and value creation (Peter et al., 2020). In the public sector, Gong and Yang (2024) apply SAF to digital government transformation, illustrating how state agencies, technology vendors and citizens form interdependent fields in which strategic direction emerges through shifting power relations and evolving understandings of public value (Gong and Yang, 2024). However, both Peter et al. (2020) and Gong and Yang (2024) largely assume a relatively stable organisational setting, and do not consider how fields evolve when technologies and their meanings shift rapidly, as in the case of AI, or other emergent technology. This relative stability stems from the study of already settled fields, which in most cases are not characterised by the same structural change as emerging fields, even when undergoing crises (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012).

Central to the SAF theory is the concept of emerging fields, where institutional arrangements, actors' positions, and shared understandings are still formed (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012). Recently, more studies have started to appear on the emergence of fields within social enterprises and energy/sustainability transitions (Maher et al., 2025; Canzler et al., 2017; Lenz, 2025; Kungl and Hess, 2021). These studies highlight SAF's suitability for analysing technology domains characterised by rapid development, contested norms, and unclear field boundaries: conditions that closely resemble the current AI climate.

2.3 Expected Research Contribution

By applying strategic action field theory to the domain of AI, this study contributes a field-level perspective that is currently missing from AI strategy research. Whereas existing studies on national AI strategies focus on policy intentions and ethical principles, and SAF applications in adjacent fields examine either stable organisational fields or long-term transitions, this study shows how actors, interests, and shared meanings are negotiated within a rapidly evolving and weakly institutionalised field. This study therefore extends SAF theory into a new empirical context and generates insights into how the AI field is emerging, and how strategic action shapes the evolution of national AI strategies.

3. Theoretical Framework

To analyse the emergence of a Swedish AI field, Strategic Action Field (SAF) theory, as presented by Fligstein and McAdam (2012) will be utilized. This enables contextualisation of complex dynamics underlying the emerging field, as well as actors and their roles. The following chapter explains the central elements of SAF theory, and relevant sub-sections of the theory.

3.1 Strategic Action Field Theory

3.1.1 Central Elements

The concept of Strategic Action Fields (SAF), originally published in the 2012 book "A Theory of Fields" by Fligstein and McAdam, offers an analytical framework for understanding stability and change in meso-level social orders, where change is produced through interactions among organised actors. Located in the intersection between social movement studies and organisational theory, the theory defines a strategic action field, hereafter interchangeably used with *fields*, as "socially constructed arenas within which actors with varying resource endowments vie for advantage" (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, p. 3). Beyond the definition of fields, Fligstein and McAdam (2012) outline six further central elements to the theory, which regard; different types of actors, social skill, the broader field environment, the consequences of exogenous shocks, episodes of contention, and field settlement (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, pp. 3-10). The central elements will be introduced below.

Within a field, there are three main types of actors: incumbents, challengers and Internal Governance Units (IGUs). Incumbents are those actors which hold power and benefit from the current institutional arrangements, both in terms of resources and the dominant logic. Challengers are those actors which control less resources, and while likely having an alternate vision for the the field and their position within it, often still replicate the dominant logic of the incumbents. IGUs are internal field actors, such as policy committees, industry organisations or state agencies, which play a stabilizing role by setting rules and providing a degree of order within the field, and as a consequence tend to align with the incumbents. Crucially, this is different from *external* state structures, which hold jurisdiction over the field but do not participate in it to any significant extent (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, pp. 13-14).

Beyond their resource endowments, actors have a unique capacity for "social skill", which is a nuanced view on individual actor agency, stemming from DiMaggio's (1988) concept of "Institutional Entrepreneurs". It is a skillset which helps transform or maintain a field, depending on if it is wielded by challengers or incumbents respectively, and concerns the ability to frame *shared understandings* and mobilize others in the field around a common vision. The concept of shared understandings is a development of the "institutional logics" perspective (Friedland and Alford 1991; Scott 2001), which Fligstein (2012, pp. 10, 16-18) and McAdam (2012) consider too broad and amorphous.

Fligstein and McAdam (2012) further presents four categories of shared understandings for field-level interactions; (1) what is at stake in the field, (2) the position and relative power of actors in the field, (3) the rules in the field, which determines what tactics are possible and legitimate, and (4) an individual broad interpretive frame to make sense of what other actors in the field are doing, reflecting actors' relative position. Here, incumbents often develop a self-serving view, while challengers develop an oppositional view (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, pp. 10-11).

The shared understandings are at the core of SAF theory, as a field is only considered settled once there is consensus regarding them. The consensus does not mean that the understandings are necessarily viewed as legitimate, only that they are perceived and accepted by the overall field at that time (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, pp. 10-11).

The field in itself is affected by multiple external factors. A key assumption within SAF is that they exist in multiple layers, with distal and proximate fields. This creates an intricate system where all fields are embedded in the broader environment. This embeddedness means that destabilizing change processes within proximate fields can result in the construction of a new field or transformation of an existing field, spreading across layers. In fact, exogenous change is the main reason for change in a field, and sufficiently large shocks in one field may cause ripples which fundamentally change the fields around it (Flistein and McAdam, 2012, pp. 18- 23).

Fligstein and McAdam (2012) calls the time in which a field is fundamentally changing an *episode of contention,* where actors are utilizing their social skills to re-shape the shared

understandings, and thereby the dominant order, of the field. Importantly however, the episodes of contention may not be sufficient to re-structure the layer, resulting in a return to status-quo. Regardless of which perspective prevails, the field is *settled* when there once again is a consensus regarding the shared understandings, primarily those of the relative positions of incumbents and challengers (Flistein and McAdam, 2012, pp. 19- 23).

3.1.2 The Emergence of Fields

Fligstein and McAdam (2012), defines an *emerging* field as "a socially constructed arena occupied by two or more groups whose actions are oriented towards each other but who have yet to develop a stable order that effectively routinizes field relations." They go on to explain how the emergence has four main dynamics, which unfold sequentially; emergent mobilization, social skill and the fashioning of a settlement, state facilitation, and the establishment of internal governance units (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, pp. 86-94).

The field dynamics are illustrated in *figure 1*. It is important to note however, that according to Fligstein and McAdam (2012), a settlement is always a work in progress where regardless of how far in the process a field has come it does not guarantee its eventual settlement (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, p. 92). Due to this continued need for reproduction, the dynamics can be viewed as compounding, and are illustrated as an arrow including the sequential stages, but without clear boundaries between them.

Emergent Mobilization is the central catalyst for field emergence, starting with exogenous change in a previously unorganized social space. The change initiates a process where common perceptions of opportunities and threats are altered, resulting in groups organizing their behavior towards each other. If the change is large enough to sustain interactions, attempts will be made to organize the space with the help of socially skilled actors. These actors use their *Social Skill* to "fashion a stable consensus regarding rules of conduct and membership criteria that routinize interaction in pursuit of common aims." (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, p. 92).

Although it is possible that a settlement is imposed through superior resource allocation, state sponsorship or the imposition of raw power, it is less common. However, Fligstein and McAdam (2012) inform that some level of *State Facilitation* is almost always present in

modern time field emergence, especially in high-capacity states. This involvement ranges from aggressive sponsorship and active backing of certain groups, to a passive certification (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, p. 94).

As a final step of the settlement, *IGUs* are almost always created for continued stabilization. They may be created to produce and disperse information, uphold the rules, or act as a lobbying presence for the field. Although in powerful bureaucracies this is not always the case, they are often perceived as useful even by challengers in order to stabilise for example crises. This leads to their near-certain creation (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, pp. 94-95).

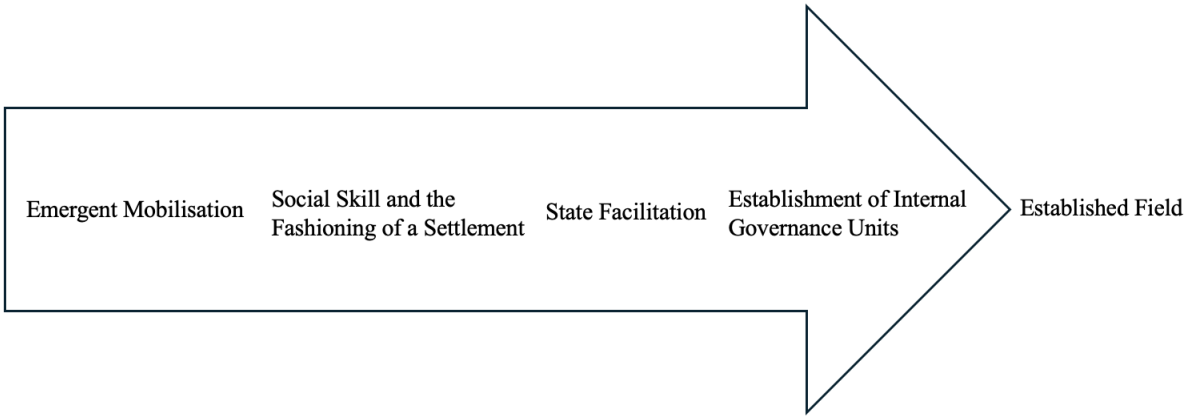

Figure 1: Dynamics of an Emerging Field (based on Fligstein and McAdam, 2012)

3.2 Discussion of Theory

The decision to utilize SAF theory is anchored in the empirical material, which emphasised individual agency over organisational logics. It reflects a deliberate choice away from an institutional theory perspective, which was originally meant to shape the analysis. While institutional theory can accommodate agency to some extent, for example through the concept of institutional entrepreneurs (DiMaggio, 1988), it is not the norm. SAF theory was, in part, developed as a reaction to this lack of agency, creating a more nuanced way of viewing field interactions (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012). This further addresses the limitation of previous research on national AI strategy, which treats official strategic documents as a coherent plan from a unified sender, neglecting the dynamics behind it. Utilizing SAF theory instead makes the strategic document into an artifact showcasing the

dominant opinions of those who wrote it, and facilitates the understanding of national strategy as an ongoing process.

However, the complex nature of SAF theory, such as the embedded- and social constructionist nature of fields, places substantial weight on how the researcher defines actor roles and field boundaries. The strength of the theory, its nuance and agency perspective, can thus result in an over-complication of the material, which risks solely being a reflection of the specific interview subjects rather than underlying field dynamics. It is therefore important to not over-emphasise actor agency, when looking at organisational- and national-level interactions.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Philosophy and Approach

4.1.1 Interpretivist Philosophy and Assumptions

The study is based on an interpretivist philosophy, where the concept of a reality is not primarily explored independently of the research subjects but rather through their perceptions and interpretations of the social world.

Underlying this philosophy we adopt the assumption of subjectivism, where we view the world as socially constructed and change as an inherent part of it (Saunders et al., 2016, pp. 127-129). Although the primary theory, SAF, can be applied across the continuum of philosophical assumptions, such as positivism and realism, it has inherently subjectivist features, such as the ontological option to define fields as socially constructed (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, p. 166). Epistemologically, narratives and interpretations are viewed as reflections of this constructed reality, informing our choice to engage in in-depth interviews, as expanded on below. Lastly, axiologically, interpretation of the researchers is recognised as a key part of the contribution, and the influence of personal values are recognised through reflexivity (Saunders et al., 2016, pp. 127-129, 725).

4.1.2 Abductive Approach

The study follows an abductive approach, which combines the deductive and inductive. Rather than testing a clear hypothesis based on theory, or generating new theory based on the

findings, data has been collected with existing theoretical frameworks in mind, while keeping an open mind to ideas outside the framework (Saunders et al., 2016, pp. 145-149). Due to the lack of previous research, the abductive approach has facilitated the utilisation of theory to understand and structure an under-studied field, while not requiring an unfounded hypothesis. Throughout the process, the theoretical framework has subsequently shifted from the initially conceived institutional logics and sensemaking perspective, towards the SAF framework, which was deemed a better fit.

4.2 Research Design

4.2.1 Qualitative Approach

A qualitative approach was chosen for the study since it aligns closely with the study's interpretivist and subjectivist assumptions, as well as the theoretical framework. It allows the research subjects to elaborate on their answers and provides more room for an alternate theoretical framework to emerge as the interviews are interpreted, something that further aligns with the abductive research approach (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 168). Furthermore, within the SAF framework, emphasis is put on shared understandings between actors as a foundation for the field's existence as well as actions taken within it. A quantitative approach would therefore not generate the necessary analytical depth, since it would require pre-determined categories and fixed variables, something that is incompatible with the aim to understand how actors themselves construct and negotiate those categories (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 166). In undertaking a qualitative approach, it is important to note however that the generalizability of the study comes into question. While it is not possible to make statistical generalisations regarding entire populations when utilising data from a small non-propability sample, methodological rigour and varying sources help ensure valuable findings (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 400). While this study primarily focuses on a single case study of the AI-commission, the temporary nature of the commission still enables interview subjects to be otherwise geographically, professionally and demographically different, increasing the representability of the sample.

4.2.2 Semi-structured Interviews

Continuing to follow the interpretivist philosophy, interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner, allowing for in depth explanations and insight into meanings beyond the literal answer. The flexible structure further aligns with the abductive approach, where it

allowed for both questions to substantiate the theoretical framework, as well as probing into new discoveries. Additionally, the trust and stronger personal connection which is facilitated by the interview format enables more honest and in depth answers, which participants may not have wanted to write down in for example a questionnaire (Saunders et al., 2016, pp. 393-394). Inherent in the semi-structured design is the lack of standardisation, which may lead to concerns about reliability/dependability and issues related to bias, such as interviewer- and participation bias (Saunders et al., 2016, pp. 396-399). To counteract this, reflexivity will be utilized to understand how possible bias could be brought into the analysis, and the interviews are complemented with secondary data to locate perspectives outside of the interview material.

4.2.3 Secondary Data

To contextualize and enrich the interview data and develop our understanding of the Swedish AI action field, we reviewed secondary documents, such as the AI-commissions final report "Roadmap for Sweden" and previous governmental AI policy, mainly "National Approach for Artificial Intelligence". Through combining and cross-checking the interview material with these documents the generalisability of the study increased (Saunders et al., 2016, pp. 330-331).

4.3 Data Collection and Interpretation

4.3.1 Sampling Strategy

In collecting primary data, interview subjects were selected based on the following non-probability selection methods. Primarily, research subjects were chosen by purposive sampling, based on their knowledge, position and involvement in the AI-commission's process. The selection aimed at reaching individuals from different organisational backgrounds, to increase the representability of our sample (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 301). Secondly, snowball sampling was utilized to reach relevant individuals which could not be identified through public documents or desktop research. Lastly, due to the timeframe of the data gathering a small number of interviews were conducted based on convenience sampling. For example, a lower rank representative was interviewed to assess the position of an organisation in the field despite scheduling difficulties with the originally contacted subject. While convenience sampling inherently contains low credibility, it was used in a limited fashion, and only if actors still met purposive selection criteria, for example through having

been in immediate contact with the AI-commission at a relevant organisation (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 304).

The final sample includes 17 interviews with 18 different individuals across the field, focusing on meso-level actors and IGUs. 5 out of the 10 members from the AI-commission were interviewed, as well as the head of the government office for the commission. Furthermore, 6 referral bodies for the roadmap were included. The additional interviews were conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the field. While the sample remains relatively small, an average interview time of 49 minutes and 42 seconds ensured depth in the material, and contributed to saturation regarding the work of the AI-commission (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 714). The interview sample is presented in Table 1 and detailed in Appendix 1.

Organisation	**Type**	**Code**
Vinnova	Orientation	OV1
IFAU	Consultation response	CRI
Stockholm AI	Orientation	OS1
Finansinspektionen	Consultation response	CRF
Startup	Orientation	OS2
LIU	Commission	CL
LED	Commission	CL2
RISE	Consultation response	CRR
AI-Sweden	Consultation response	CRA
Försvarsmakten	Orientation	OF
MSB	Consultation response	CRM
WASP	Commission	CW
Regeringskansliet	Commission	CR
Tillväxtverket	Consultation response	CRT
Sveriges Ingenjörer	Commission	CS
Vinnova	Orientation	OV2

Table 1.

4.3.2 Interview Process

All interviews except one were conducted in Swedish, to limit the language barrier and improve the interview quality. Interviews were mainly conducted and recorded via Microsoft Teams. The digital format enabled the geographically diverse set of subjects while minimising the disadvantages of telephone interviews, enabling trust through visible body language. Furthermore, trust was an important consideration of the interview-guide (Appendix 2), which was designed to enable gradual depth in questions, to both understand the field as well as the jockeying within it (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 421). The interview guide was adjusted after the first orienting interviews, and the flexible structure allowed slight variations throughout the process. The goal of these adjustments were solely to adjust the outline to more relevantly reflect the research topic, rather than drastically change it, to maintain comparability between subjects.

Interviews were automatically transcribed through Microsoft Office, and relevant material was manually controlled and corrected from transcription errors. Extracts which were used in the empirical section of the study were then translated into English after checks by both researchers.

4.3.4 Thematic Analysis

The study was conducted with thematic analysis, a systematic yet flexible approach to qualitative data, which aligns with the abductive approach (Saunders et al., 2016, pp. 579-587). The data was coded manually, by going through interview transcripts, recordings and notes to find relevant themes and initial codes. Although originally derived solely from the data, a subset evolved into a priori codes of SAF theory for emerging fields, exhibited in *figure 2*.

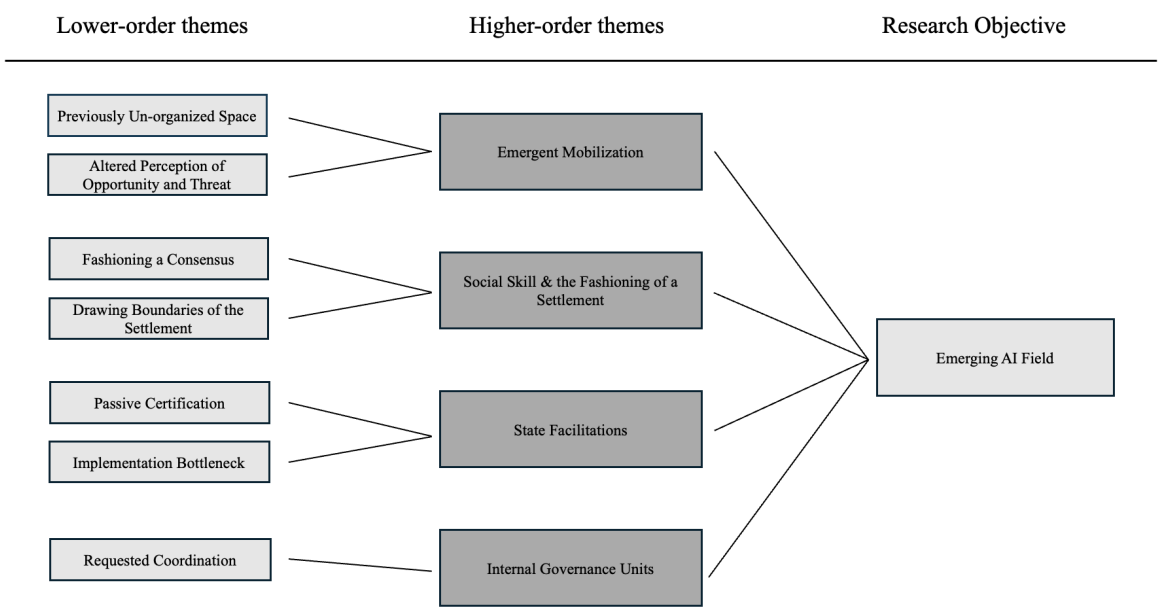

Figure 2: A Priori Thematic Analysis (Månsson and Weidel, 2025)

4.4 Ethical Considerations and Utilization of AI

4.4.1 Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with the Stockholm School of Economics (SSE) ethical policy, including the handling of sensitive data in accordance with GDPR. Sensitive data was only stored, transcribed and handled utilising either physical notebooks or the school's office package, which was deemed secure by SSE. Furthermore, all interview participants were informed of the handling of data prior to recording, and beyond giving verbal confirmation a GDPR form was sent out in connection to the interview. Furthermore, in accordance with GDPR, participants had the right to withdraw consent for the storage of their data, and an active effort was made to ensure that all participants felt correctly represented. Participants also had the opportunity to ask questions and provide additional information both before and after the interview, to ensure a safe format. No personal sensitive data was recorded.

4.4.2 Utilization of AI

AI was utilized as an aid during the research study to increase efficiency. For example, automatic transcriptions within Microsoft Teams are AI-powered, and reduce transcription times by countless hours. Tools like GPT-5 and built-in AI within full-text databases were utilized to summarise and suggest new research articles, assisting in gaining an overview of

the relevance for the study before deep-diving. Furthermore, GPT-5 was utilized to translate anonymised quotes and assist in grammar checks. As outlined in ethical considerations however, no sensitive data was put through external AI services.

4.5 Quality of Research

The semi-structured format and abductive approach inherently limits standardisation across interviews, creating challenges for traditional notions of reliability. However, this lack of standardisation is also foundational to the strengths of the qualitative methods, allowing for a more nuanced understanding and in-depth analysis (Saunders et al., 2016, pp. 204-205). To ensure that a sufficient level of reliability is achieved, several measures were implemented and have been brought up throughout the methodology. The interview process was consistently documented, and adjustments to the guide were made only to improve relevance while maintaining comparability. Reflexivity was applied to address potential interviewer bias, and transcription accuracy was ensured through manual verification, with all quoted material available in its original language.

Furthermore, the validity was strengthened through data triangulation, including governmental AI policy documents. This cross-checking helped situate individual stories within a broader institutional and field context, as to decrease the risks associated with a small, non-probability sample. While complete statistical generalization is neither intended nor feasible from a snapshot in a constantly fluctuating field, the study provides an analytical account of the field which can serve as context for future explorations, and maintains dependability and credibility.

5. Empirical Findings

The empirical data derived from our study will be presented on a thematic basis in two segments; firstly to contextualize the emergence of a field and secondly to describe how different actors and perspectives have influenced the process. *Figure 3* gives a brief overview of the AI-commissions process.

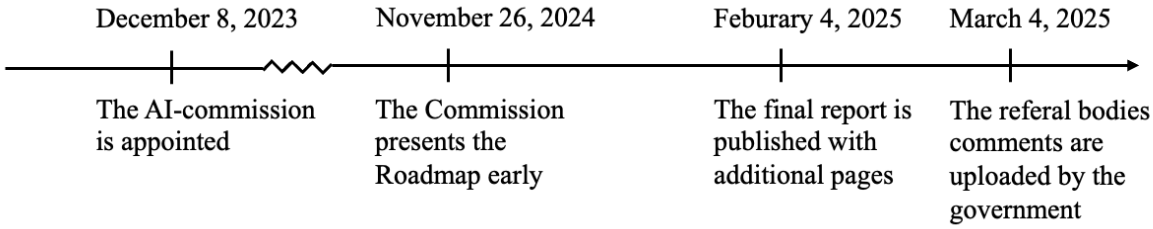

Figure 3: Timeline of the AI-commissions process (Månsson and Weidel, 2025)

5.1 Context on the Emergence of a Field

5.1.1 Actors Shifting Perception

The interview material indicates that the perception of AI surged dramatically following the release of ChatGPT in 2022. Several respondents describe this moment as a turning point that drastically increased public awareness and broadened engagement with AI across sectors.

> *"There was a major difference after ChatGPT was launched and people across the market really got their eyes up for AI."* **CL2**

> *"AI is now available to everyone [...] there is enormous hype and substantial money involved [...] the pace of the development is extremely rapid."* **CR1**

Prior to this shift, interviews describe that AI had predominantly been discussed within technical or research-oriented settings and had engaged a relatively small group of actors. It was not generally regarded as an issue of national political relevance or as requiring coordinated action, but rather a specialized domain. They describe how different actors began to adjust their positions in response to each other's initiatives.

> *"Politicians saw how other countries were running past us….the time had come [to do something]."* **CR**

5.1.2 Consensus as the Way Forward

Most interviewees agree that the Roadmap is a thorough document taking most of the field considerations into account. All disagreements from the members of the committee are made

quite apathically, even while recognising that they disagree with e.g. the budget size or allocation.

> *"Regarding conflict, I don´t feel that there were any major disagreements. They were, of course, certain chapters or sections that were discussed, but eventually reached an agreement."* **CL**

> *"Different backgrounds produced different perspectives… especially around risks and regulation."* **CW**

The Commission's task was frequently described in terms of creating a meaningful shared vision rather than producing a purely technocratic manual.

> *"We chose to call it a roadmap… otherwise we would have been forced into a formal SOU with cost calculations and prioritizations."* **CS**

> *"We wanted to create a roadmap rather than a traditional inquiry, to tell the story."* **CR**

Several respondents emphasized that the work was explicitly oriented towards consensus.

> "*It was tough editing work… we didn't want it to become a report only for experts, but something that everyone could stand behind.*" **CS**

Several interviewees describe how the commission complemented its formal membership by bringing in additional competence during the process.

> *"We very early decided to bring in expertise from elsewhere, for example from the Tax Agency and the Social Insurance Agency."* **CW**

These actors are described as having become *"more or less adjugated"* into the Commission's work.

Several members describe how a shared sense of urgency within the AI-commission shaped the work process.

> *"Copyright, data issues – may things we could not resolve [...] we prioritized speed and feasibility."* **CR**

5.1.3 State Involvement and Governance

A recurring theme across all interviews is the perception of the Swedish state's role as reactive, fragmented and under-resourced in its facilitation, even as expectations on governance grow. Several interviewees emphasise that the Swedish state acknowledges the urgency of AI but is structurally incapable of moving at the required speed.

> "*Implementation is going slowly [...] I expected more. [...] we are too slow in Sweden… we must dare to invest before everything is perfect."* **CW**

Multiple interviews further highlight a mismatch between the state ambitions and resources.

> *"We got five million [to conduct the inquiry] - it is laughable. We made soup out of a nail."* **CR**

> *"Research infrastructures depend on national support… universities cannot do this alone."* **OL**

Fragmentation within the state apparatus is frequently described as a coordination problem internal to the government. Since AI is cross-sectional, it is experienced as falling between existing organisational structures rather than being governed by them.

> *"Our administrative model does not work for systematic issues."* **CR**

5.1.4 Coordination and Re-enforcement

A reiterated narrative among the interviews is that Sweden lacks stable authoritative national actors responsible for coordinating AI policy, infrastructure or implementation across the public and private sectors.

"The Government Office take time… difficult to get a grip on… the AI secretariat is not what we proposed" **CR**

"AI Sweden is a national network… but more of a project than an institution" **OL**

Without a central actor to issue interpretations, standards, or procurement guidance, each municipality and agency must navigate legality on its own.

*"We discuss cloud choices [...] the legality of storing data in the US."***CRF**

Interviewees further emphasise that AI and digitalisation are treated as separate policy areas. Agencies that previously had coordinating roles in national digitalisation processes are described as having no corresponding mandate within AI. The responsibilities for coordination are further perceived as highly fragmented across the public sector.

5.2 Shared Understandings of the Emerging AI field

5.2.1 What Is at Stake

Many interviewees highlight investment as the key practical stake. While there is a broad agreement within the AI-commission that governance and investment are urgently needed, opinions differ on how resources should be allocated.

The private sector actors emphasise the need for skilled labour and secure infrastructure in order to participate in the AI value chains and avoid economic losses.

"Norway and Finland already make seven or eight times larger investment than Sweden [...] we mostly talk in theory about doing this in the future."If Ericsson does not invest now, then in five years they risk lagging behind their competitors..." **OL**

The public sector stresses the high costs of AI investments needed to achieve efficiency gains. Several respondents further describe how public-sector AI initiatives often are bottom up and with limited funding which constrains implementation and scaling.

"Some municipalities barely have money to run their IT services… the AI becomes another hill to climb before they can get any return." **CRF**

5.2.2 Actors and Their Relative Power

The most influential actors in the Swedish AI landscape are considered by the interviewees:

(1) Private companies and foundations that have invested substantial resources in AI research and technology, such as Wallenberg Autonomous Systems and Software Program (WASP), Ericsson, Volvo, and AstraZeneca, that controls infrastructure, expertise and a lot of human capital.

"WASP produces 700 PhDs […] 70% stay in Sweden." **CW**

(2) State-funded and partly state-funded institutes and organisations that have taken a leading role in advancing the agenda, including RISE, AI Sweden and The Swedish Research Council (*Vetenskapsrådet*).

"Every university can't afford to build their own, so that's often supported at the national level, with the Swedish Research Council designating one party to take responsibility for it." **OL**

(3) Large, digitalized public agencies, such as the Swedish Tax Agency *(Skatteverket)* and the Social Insurance Agency *(Försäkringskassan)*, were repeatedly identified as central stakeholders in the public sector, due to their high level of digitalisation.

"When you look at the sections concerning the public sector, it was the Tax Agency and the Social Insurance Agency that had the most influence there." **CW**

"We very early decided to bring expert competence from outside, so for example we had [representatives from the same agencies] that have come relatively far in how they use AI in their digitalization efforts [...] they more or less became adjunct members" **CS**

(4) Alongside the perceived strong actors, some weaker actors are trying to take part in the field, among others smaller agencies and municipalities who are expected to adopt AI, but lack the financial resources.

> *"We had only one representative from the public sector among the members[...]public sector is half of GDP."* **CL2**

Several interviewees with experience from the public sector sought to emphasize that its various branches differ substantially, and that large agencies such as the Tax Agency and the Social Insurance Agency who became involved therefore do not adequately represent their interests.

> *"'We know more than others!'- that kind of attitude you can develop when working in a large organisation. [...] but when I started working in a municipality, I was shocked. It was so different that I could not have imagined how fundamentally different the mandate was."* **CL2**

> *"'Now we have a solution for the public sector and no one should do anything else.' But that solution did not fit our regulatory mandate at all. That was what we reacted to–the lack of recognition of the diversity of authorities that exist [...]."* **CRF**

Alongside these actors, some interviewees from the commission also pointed to stakeholders who were perceived as important, who were largely absent from the work but could have contributed with valuable perspectives, including socially oriented academic disciplines, defence agencies and the parties of the labour market.

> *"The parties of the labour market were not represented… this concerns the entire labour market [...] we compensated through the interviews."* **CS**

Interviews conducted with representatives from these domains revealed both a self-identified distance to the AI agenda and an internal lack of designated individuals advancing the issue within their respective organisations.

"We are evaluators, not policymakers." **CR1**

"Academic papers are outdated by about three years compared to commercial labs." **OS1**

"AI is often driven by enthusiasts" **CR1**

"It is people and not structures , who have driven this" **CL2**

5.2.3 Rules of the field

Interviewees describe that they can only act within the Swedish procedural and bureaucratic rules, emphasizing that the formal procedures constrain what is possible, but that the commission could form the product.

"Autonomy emerged because we took the mandate [...] we work in the service of the citizens [...] we brought in experts" **CR**

"The core group made all the decisions… the editing process was made by the staff" **CS**

"Inquiries are shaped by the one who sits in them" **CRT**

The level of involvement of other actors is perceived to have depended on invitation and the possibility to affect the product for the parties not involved in the process was shaped by the routinized remiss process.

"The process is simple [...] you read the SOU, you comment, that's it." **CL**

The AI-commission, tasked with accelerating the national strategy, also experienced stringent bureaucratic expectations.

"We thought: they will take our roadmap as is […] that is not how the Government Offices work." **CR**

While considered critical for national AI capacity, certain domains such as the Swedish school were also politically off limits, to the interviewees dismay.

"The directives were extremely broad…but we were not allowed to write about schools or the labour market." **CR**

5.2.4 The Interpretive Frame

Across all interviews with respondents with the commission, AI is described as a critical societal inflection point, touching economic competitiveness, democratic stability, the labour market, information integrity, ethics, security and the viability of the welfare state.

A central recurring theme is the risk that **Sweden is falling behind** economically, technologically and geopolitically.

> *"AI will be decisive for Sweden's future competitiveness, security, and prosperity [...] falling behind risks major negative consequences in both the short and the long term."* (SOU 2025:12)

> *"Politicians see other countries run past us… the indexes show we have fallen behind…"* **CR**

> *"It is not obvious that there is a hurry [for governance] the technology drives adoption itself."* **CR1**

Especially representatives of public agencies frame AI as critical to the **long term viability of the welfare state**, given demographic pressures and administrative strain.

> *"We will be fewer younger people keeping society running… AI may play a decisive role so that fewer people can do certain tasks… If we want to maintain the societal standards that we used to, we must change how we work – and AI is crucial for that."* **CS**

Several respondents also point to growing concerns related to geopolitical and foreign policy dynamics. This pressure is particularly evident in the emerging perception that Swedish actors risk losing access to future economic growth if it does not participate in key segments of the AI value chain, as well as in concerns about diminished technological or data driven sovereignty.

> *"It is dangerous to become too dependent on technology we now have access to but that could disappear [...] with the situation in the US, everything changes constantly.*

[...] Europe has no chance to build its own chips [profitable…] but it becomes meaningless if we are not allowed to buy them, so we must develop alternatives anyway." **OL**

"Every commercial entity knows they are exposed… a rule change in the US or Europe can instantly disrupt entire services." **OS1**

"the only way to prevent misuse [of the technology] is to stay at the forefront" **CW**

6. Analysis

In this chapter the empirics will be analysed with the help of Fligstein and McAdam's (2012) theory on Strategic Action Fields. The first section argues that a Swedish AI field is emerging. The second section provides a snapshot of the shared understandings in the field, diving into the components of; what's at stake, actors and their relative power, rules of the field, and shared frames.

6.1 The Emerging AI Field

6.1.1 Emergent Mobilization

The empirical material suggests that the societal shift surrounding AI triggered by the release of large language models and breakthroughs of generative AI can be understood as a critical juncture in the development of the Swedish AI field. Interpreted through Fligstein and McAdam's (2012) Strategic Action Fields framework, the launch constituted an exogenous shock that altered *perceptions about opportunities and threats,* thereby transforming the stakes of the field. The shock generated widespread public awareness, and AI stopped being treated primarily as a specialized production technology, but increasingly as a strategic factor with broad economic, political and societal implications. Due to the previous social AI space being characterised by limited coordination, a narrow community and the absence of strong political or administrative actors, this meant that a previously *un-organized social space* was now mobilizing.

6.1.2 Social Skill and the Fashioning of a Settlement

The limited expression of overt conflict within the AI-commission and the broad recognition of the roadmap are analytically significant given the heterogeneity of actors and policy issues involved. From a Strategic Action Fields perspective, the commission's abilities to skirt typical bureaucratic inhibitions, by a conscious name choice, and taking the mandate to both include additional topics and to adjudicate additional members, perfectly aligns with the operation of *social skill*, defined by Fligstein and McAdam's (2012) as the capacity of actors to induce cooperation and coordinate collective action under conditions of uncertainty.

In order to *fashion a consensus*, these socially skilled actors made the choice to prioritise speed and widespread high-level recommendations, subordinating the precise details of each decision to the importance of delivering a unified direction forward. Furthermore, although the process was characterised by inclusion, the choice of whom to adjudicate compared to invite for an interview or workshop can be viewed as cementing the membership criteria, and thereby *drawing the boundaries of the settlement*. The shared understandings which are integral to the settlement are further analysed in section 6.2.

6.1.3 State Facilitation

The presence of the private sector is integral to the advance of AI in Sweden, as evidenced by their comparably large budgets put into AI research and outreach. In contrast, the Swedish state can be viewed as a source of inertia, with several actors talking of the slow pace. However, as emphasised by Fligstein and McAdam (2012), high capacity modern states are almost always included in the formation of a field within their reach, and the Swedish AI field constitutes no exception. Although the appointment of the AI-commission was externally advocated for and a limiting budget was allocated, the appointment can be viewed as a *passive certification* of the field. By appointing the commission the state provided a legitimate arena for consensus-building and chose which actors to include, thereby further legitimising their positions in the emerging field. For the field to become stable however, this passive certification is unlikely to be the sole intervention of the state. The commission created further recommendations for budget allocations, legislative measures and a strategic direction forward that the state can either continue to certify, or retract its endorsement of.

6.1.4 Internal Governance Units

The empirical material indicates that the Swedish AI social space lacks IGUs. While AI Sweden partially aspires to be one, through spreading information about the implementation of AI, it is not perceived as such by other field members. The lack of hierarchical coordination therefore creates an institutional void, that shifts the burden of governance downward and forces organisations to independently navigate legality, risk and implementation.

While at first glance, governmental agencies which fund research into AI may be perceived as IGUs, through controlling and dispersing resources. These actors are however not *internal* to the AI field, as they fund AI research among many other topics and are better categorised as external state structures, or part of the proximate research field.

Agencies that previously held coordinating roles in the digitalisation process were not granted corresponding authority in the AI domain. From a SAF perspective, this separation undermines institutional continuity from adjacent, already structured fields. While this supports the interpretation of the emerging AI field as a subfield branching out from the IT field rather than a part of it, the perceived separation has deprived the emerging AI field of stable governance units, which could have facilitated early stabilisation. In SAF terms, this indicates a field in an early and unsettled phase of emergence, as rules, roles and hierarchies remain only weakly institutionalised. With no strong internal governance units replicating field understandings, coordination remains unstable despite high mobilisation.

6.1.5 Emergence Process

In the previous sections, three out of four of Fligstein and McAdam's (2012) dynamics shaping field formation were established, providing clear indications of an emergent AI field in Sweden. While the fourth and final dynamic, the establishment of Internal Government Units, was not found, the sequential nature of the process indicates its impending approach. In *figure 4*, the dotted line therefore represents where in the emergence process the Swedish AI field was in February 2025, when the AI-commission finalised its work.

It is important to remember however that according to Fligstein and McAdam (2012), a settlement must always be regarded as a work in progress, and previous success does not

guarantee that the field will ever be stable. Because of this, the sequential nature can be viewed as compounding of the previous attributes, and the continued evolution of the technology and social skill of groups within the field remains important even as the field progresses. Furthermore, it is unlikely that the appointment of the AI-commission fully represents state facilitation, and continued facilitation will be of substantial significance.

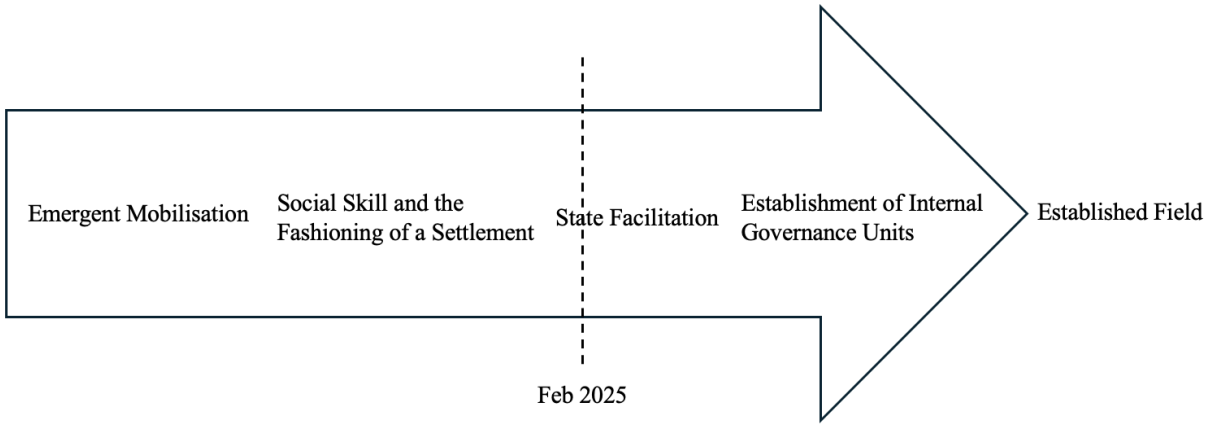

Figure 4: Dynamics of Field Emergence - The AI field in February 2025 (based on Fligstein and McAdam 2012).

6.2 Shared Understandings in the Emerging AI Field

6.2.1 What Is at Stake

According to Fligstein and McAdam (2012), one of the first things which a consensus is formed around in an emerging field is *what's at stake*. In this study, the empirical material suggests that this is the allocation of state funding and investment. However, while there is a shared understanding that governance and financial commitment is urgently needed, the preferred scale and allocation of this reflect the divergent positional interests of the different actors. For example, after participating in the creation of the roadmap, Skatteverket and Försäkringskassan were assigned the responsibility of creating an "AI workshop", with a budget allocation of one hundred million sek. While the Roadmap claims that this investment is made to benefit all governmental agencies, smaller agencies claim that Skatteverket and Försäkringskassans mandates are significantly different from theirs, diminishing their usefulness of the workshop. Instead, they want a budget for AI implementation. This indicates that the real benefit of influence in the roadmap process is the allocation of resources.

6.2.2 Actors' Position and Relative Power

The empirical material reveals an asymmetrical distribution of power within the emerging Swedish AI field, as influence is concentrated around a relatively small group of actors, controlling key strategic resources. In SAF terms these actors, controlling capital, technological infrastructure and human competence, occupy positions of incipient incumbents, despite the field being in an early and unsettled phase. Here, the private sector dominates the field, although some large public sector agencies are able to participate. The subsequent gap until small and medium enterprises and agencies are accounted for is large, as depicted by the sole representative for a small agency perspective in the commission. This is in line with the SAF theory on incumbent and challenger dynamics.

Actors' positions and relative power can further be viewed as routinised through the AI-commissions work. The question of who was invited to the process enabled those very actors to shape the Swedish strategic direction for AI, and position themselves to gain more resources in the future. At the same time, quotes like "we took the mandate" indicate a previous comfort in the role, further proving that the commission was represented by an incumbent perspective.

6.2.3 Rules of the Field

The repeated references to the limitations of bureaucracy, as well as the need to stay "realistic" about how things work, indicate a strong understanding of the rules within the field, especially pertaining to the acquisition of government funding. The empirical framing of the AI-commission likely brings these governmental procedural roles even closer. However, rules also pertained to which actors were legitimate in the field, where established digital leaders were rewarded both in the private and public sector. This meant that while public sector actors were welcome, it only concerned those who embraced digitalisation, and actors representing a more bureaucratic and legislative perspective were not welcomed.

6.2.4 The Collective Interpretive Frame of the Strategic Actors

Underlying the dimension of what is at stake in the field, the last shared understanding is a self-serving interpretive frame which the actors, or often coalitions, bring to make sense of the field. In the case of the emergent Swedish AI field, the incumbent perspective is characterised by the inevitability of AI, making the resources which are at stake a question of

long term competitive survival. They believe that if they do not get the necessary investments, they will fall behind in a global context. Furthermore, since the incumbents have such prominent positions in the Swedish context, they believe that their loss of competitive advantage means an almost equal loss for Sweden as a country.

Since the interpretive frame is the understanding which most reflects actors relative positions in the field, the theory explains the likely existence of an *oppositional interpretive frame*, typically employed by challengers. While this study has limited insights into challengers, the empirics support such a perspective within smaller governmental agencies. The oppositional frame instead believes that AI is a technology among many others, making the resource allocation into a question of individual company profits or agency budgets, rather than the competitive edge of the country.

7. Discussion

7.1 Answering the Research Question

This thesis aims to answer the following research question:

What shapes the emergence and shared understandings of a Swedish AI Field?

Although the answers are inherently interconnected, we will answer the two components of this question separately, as has been done in the empirical and analytical sections.

7.1.1 What Shapes the Emergence of a Swedish AI Field?

As has been demonstrated in the empirical and analytical sections, the emergence of a Swedish AI field closely resembles the theoretical framework on emerging fields provided by Fligstein and McAdam (2012). The empirical material has unanimously found support for the first two dimensions of the theory: *emergent mobilization* and *social skill and the fashioning of a settlement*. The case study on the AI-commission in itself further serves as proof of the third dimension, *state facilitation*. While the fourth dimension of *IGUs* has not been substantiated, the sequential essence of the theory implies a relative position in the emergence process, illustrated in *figure 4*. As such, the emergence of a Swedish AI field is primarily shaped by the technological innovation of generative AI, which in turn has mobilised

powerful actors in proximate fields to utilize their social power into creating their own arena, built on the shared understandings in section 7.1.2.

7.1.2 What Shapes the Shared Understandings of a Swedish AI Field?

In accordance with Fligstein and McAdam (2012), there are four different types of shared understandings shaping the emerging Swedish AI Field:

- *What's at stake.* Actors in the field are currently competing over resources provided by the state. These resources are not primarily in the form of direct payment, but rather beneficial investments such as research grants, educational programs and infrastructure investments. The focus on state resources is a natural consequence of the major arena at the time being a government appointed commission.
- *Actors and their relative positions.* The actors which shape the field are large, private sector organisations, followed by large research institutions and select highly digitalised government branches such as the tax agency.
- *Rules of the field*. While bureaucracy is found to be a source of inertia, it is viewed as an inevitable consequence of government, and actors regard formal procedure as inevitable.
- *Shared Interpretive Frame*. The incumbent frame posits that AI is an inevitable development, making the field about their long term competitive survival. If they do not get the necessary resources (what's at stake), they will lose their competitiveness on an international arena. Since they are very influential in Swedish technology, they believe that this could risk the entire country's competitiveness. The oppositional perspective is that this is more about the sales of individual companies, but Sweden will remain competitive, for example by focusing on other technologies.

7.2 Contribution

This study contributes to contemporary theory in two main streams: that of field emergence within Strategic Action Field theory and that of National AI Strategy research.

Within SAF theory, our findings align with the framework for field emergence, locating three out of four dynamics, employed in the sequential order they are provided. However, while we do not locate the fourth element, in the form of any stable internal governance units, the

assumption of a sequential order within field emergence dynamics does not mean that the lack of IGUs indicate theory failure (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012). Research by Canzler et al. (2017) takes this even further, and analyses an emerging field based on the organisation of actors towards each other, without the aspects of state facilitation or IGUs. However, they also emphasise the uncertainty regarding field emergence, making sure not to guarantee any field settlement (Canzler et al., 2017).

Our research does however raise other questions from the theoretical framework, through the speed at which the field is emerging. Although Fligstein and McAdam (2012) stresses the continuously increasing speed of field emergence as a consequence of technology advancement, they exemplify fields as forming over 15 years or several decades (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, p. 87). This stands in stark contrast to the 3 years over which the Swedish emerging AI field has been active. We do not believe however, that this negates AI in Sweden as an emerging field. Firstly, this is because SAF theory *does* mention technology advancement as a factor in increased field emergence. Secondly, because the Swedish AI field has yet to settle. As such, it might take years until the field is stable, eventually aligning with the proposed timeline either way. We further agree with Canzler et al (2017) that there is value in analysing fields even though they might not eventually settle.

While our research takes the perspective of the AI-commission as an arena for consensus among socially skilled incumbents, utilizing Maher et al. (2025), the AI-commissions roadmap could likely be interpreted as a temporary governance unit as part of an institutional fiefdom, which is a powerful actor in itself, rather than a reproduction of incumbent views (Maher et al., 2025). A commonality between our research and that of Maher et al. (2025) is however the usage of SAF on a national arena, with research in adjacent fields such as digital transformation often taking an organisational perspective (Peter et al., 2020; Bumann and Peter, 2019).

Within National AI Strategy research, we notice a methodological and ontological difference. We have chosen to study Sweden's strategic AI direction through the lens of Strategic Action Field theory, where we view strategy as an ongoing process to gain insight into, rather than unified direction stemming from official documents. The view of strategy as an enacted process is not entirely unique in strategy research (Whittington, 1996). However previous

research within specifically national AI strategies has often studied to what extent ethical principles, trustworthiness and values occur in official strategic documents (van Berkel et al., 2020; NíFhaoláin et al., 2020; Wilson, 2022).

7.3 Limitations

The study has two main limitations. Firstly, although the empirical lens of the AI-commission serves as a melting pot of differing understandings, it also had the ability of filtering out those with which it did not agree, both knowingly and unknowingly. While providing strong insight into attempted field-ordering, we are therefore at risk of being subjected to the biases which are reproduced within the AI-commission. Secondly, while an attempt was made to represent the field as fairly as possible, including those views which might be less represented within the AI-commission, time and access constraints led to uneven actor coverage. Most notably, we did not manage to interview the tax- or social insurance agencies, which were reoccuringly mentioned as key public agencies. As such, we recommend future research be directed at more thoroughly understanding the public sector and challenger perspectives within the Swedish AI Field.

8. Conclusion

This study aims to understand how a Swedish AI Field is emerging, and what shared understandings shape it, by utilising Fligstein and McAdam's (2012) Strategic Action Fields (SAF) perspective. In order to do this, the study utilises a qualitative case study with 17 semi-structured interviews on the Swedish AI-commission. The study finds that AI in Sweden is developing in accordance with the steps for emergence of a field, as outlined by SAF theory. It further outlines the four shared understandings which shape the continued reproduction of the field: what is at stake, actors and their relative positions, rules in the field, and a shared interpretive frame. In the end, the study contributes with an empirical application of SAF theory, which has to our knowledge not been used within AI before. It further contributes to research on national AI strategy, by expanding it beyond text-analysis.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Interviews

Organisation	Type	Code	Lenght
Vinnova	Orientation	OV1	75 min 38 s
IFAU	Consultation response	CRI	40 min 58 s
Stockholm AI	Orientation	OS1	53 min 14 s
Finansinspektionen	Consultation response	CRF	44 min 6 s
Startup	Orientation	OS2	33 min 42 s
LIU (NAISS)	Orientation	OL	56 min 35 s
LIU	Commission	CL	49 min 30 s
Sundsvall municipality	Commission	CL2	54 min 26 s
RISE	Consultation response	CRR	33 min 8 s
AI-Sweden	Consultation response	CRA	30 min 52 s
Försvarsmakten	Orientation	OF	36 min 22 s
MSB	Consultation response	CRM	59 min 55 s
WASP	Commission	CW	50 m 21 s
Regeringskansliet	Commission	CR	57 min 33 s
Tillväxtverket	Consultation response	CRT	55 min 49 s
Sveriges Ingenjörer	Commission	CS	64 min 13 s
Vinnova	Orientation	OV2	47 min 44 s

Appendix 2: Interview Guides (translated to English)

<u>Adapted for the AI commission:</u>

Introduction

- Introduction of ourselves and our study
- Permission to record and information about GDPR
- Please tell us about yourself, what do you work with?
- What is your background within AI?

The AI-commissions Work

- Could you tell us about the process behind the roadmap, how did you work?
- What work group were you part of?
- How do you feel about the end product, do you think it reflects your opinions?
- Is there anything you feel was not included, or was missed, that should have been included?
- How did you handle disagreements within the commission?
- Did you have any conflicts?

Actors and Positions Within the Field

- Who would you say are the most influential actors within the AI field in Sweden?
- Was there any actor which you felt had a large effect on the commissions work?
- How would you describe the relationship between different actors in the field? For example government actors, universities, trade associations and private companies?
- Have you noticed any differences in prioritisation between different external actors during your work?

The Conversation on AI in Sweden and the position of the particular actor

- What would you say are the main talking points around AI in Sweden?
- How has the conversation around AI in Sweden changed over the last decade?
- What aspects of AI do you think should be prioritized?
- What do you think about the role of AI in the future?

Rounding off

- Is there anything more that you want to say, or feel like we should have asked you?
- Do you have any recommendations for who else we should talk to?
- Reminder about GDPR
- Thank you so much for your time

<u>Adapted for Consultation Respondants:</u>

Introduction

- Introduction of ourselves and our study
- Permission to record and information about GDPR
- Please tell us about yourself, what do you work with?
- What is your background within AI?

The Consultation Process

- Could you tell us about the consultation process at your organisation, what was your part?
- What is your overall opinion of the roadmap?
- Is there anything you feel was not included, or was missed, that should have been included in the roadmap?
- Could you tell us about your involvement in the roadmap process prior to the consultation response, were you invited to any interviews or workshops?
- (We see that you wrote X in your consultation response, could you elaborate a bit on that?)

Actors and Positions Within the Field

- Who would you say are the most influential actors within the AI field in Sweden?
- Was there any actor which you felt had a large effect on the commissions work?
- How would you describe the relationship between different actors in the field? For example government actors, universities, trade associations and private companies?
- Have you noticed any differences in prioritisation between different external actors during your work?

The Conversation on AI in Sweden and the position of the particular actor

- What would you say are the main talking points around AI in Sweden?
- How has the conversation around AI in Sweden changed over the last decade?
- What aspects of AI do you think should be prioritized?
- What do you think about the role of AI in the future?

Rounding off

- Is there anything more that you want to say, or feel like we should have asked you?
- Do you have any recommendations for who else we should talk to?
- Reminder about GDPR
- Thank you so much for your time