WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM

COMMITTED TO IMPROVING THE STATE OF THE WORLD

Global Future Council on AI for Humanity

Summary of panel session at the Sustainable AI conference

17 June 2021

Thinking Beyond Today – Intergenerational Justice, Sustainability & AI

Discussions about the future of AI are often dominated by one of two narratives: in the tech-solutionism account, artificial intelligence can help rid the world of its most pressing social and environmental challenges. In the Anthropocene-focused narrative, humans have set the world on a path of irreparable ecological destruction, and AI perpetuates that destruction. Neither of these accounts is sufficiently nuanced to help societies build the proper regulatory frameworks to unleash the potential of AI to serve the common good. What narratives are needed to replace them? What values and principles can guide regulation to support a positive future for AI?

Attention to intergenerational needs must be foundational to AI regulation. Today's business models and election cycles often support short-term thinking. Additionally, nations around the world are competing to be the fastest and most dynamic in generating and adopting AI technologies. Despite these short-term pressures, AI necessitates long-term infrastructure building. Just as dams and bridges must be designed to accommodate the needs of future generations and multiple constituencies, our computational infrastructure must also be developed with long-term interests in mind. Such foresight is necessary given that many of the large-scale technological systems conceived today will not be operational for years to come.

Focusing on the efficiency of a technology may come at the expense of supporting its resiliency. Larenna Jaume-Palasí, founder of the Ethical Tech Society, cautions that maximizing the efficiency of AI leads to developing technologies that thrive under stable conditions. However, the long-term nature of technological infrastructures demands that we focus on resiliency rather than simply efficiency to ensure that new systems can adapt and respond to changing social, political, economic and ecological needs.

In recent years, policymakers and technologists have become more attuned to the environmental implications of big data. This orientation must be expanded beyond ecological concerns to consider the societal and interpersonal dimensions of data pollution. Our "digital data footprints … immobilize and shape our futures in concrete ways," notes Gry Hasselbalch, cofounder of DataEthics. For many young people who grew up in an era with scant data protections, these constraints could prove formative to future opportunities. This "lost generation" of digital natives must serve as a reminder to regulators of the need for greater technological protections in the future.

Another fault line for AI regulations involves a mismatch between the individualized focus of law—particularly Roman and German legal traditions—and consumer-oriented technology production. AI relies on mathematics and algorithms to strip individuals from their social contexts and particularities. Likewise, Western legal traditions typically focus on the protection of individual rights. What is missing from this individualistic orientation in both law and technology is a focus on common goods and social values. Protecting sustainability, preserving security, and ensuring social cohesion, for example, require setting collective priorities and coordinating action beyond the level of the individual.

Today's climate crisis looms large over conversations about AI, and one lesson from climate change is that individualized solutions—while useful—lack the broad scale and reach to bring about necessary changes. It's not enough for consumers to decide to abstain from using AI technology, given that AI is embedded in invisibly and deeply in a range of social processes. Larissa Bolt, research student at the University of Bonn, notes that the prevalence of AI technology makes it even more challenging to "live authentic and ethical life in the face of the climate crisis." AI technology is everywhere. "I don't even know that I'm using it. And how do I know if it's sustainable?" she asks.

Instead of relying on consumers to lead sustainability efforts, broader solutions such as regulation and policy coordination are needed to ensure that technology develops in a way that accommodates multigenerational needs, as well as the rights of planet itself.

The current trajectory of AI development gives mixed reasons for optimism. As we know from the analog world, the biases and blind spots of infrastructure-builders are often embedded in the infrastructure they construct. Marginalized communities have learned about the importance of demanding representation and inclusion in political and legal spheres; however, many vulnerable communities continue to be underrepresented in technology and to lack clear pathways to increasing representation. Sara Cole Stratton, founder of Māori Lab, notes that working toward a more inclusive, flourishing future involves creating ways for all people can participate in the development of technology.

Stratton cited the reflections of a Maori elder, who observed, “Western science and technology may claim to have the know-how, but we have the know-why.” Indeed, it is the “know-why” that ensures new technologies are marshalled to support of individual protections and community priorities.

By Mary Bridges

……

Disclosures
The views expressed are those of certain participants in the discussion and do not necessarily reflect the views of all participants or of the World Economic Forum.

……