Communication Rights, Civil Society, and Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is increasingly being used in daily life, often in ways unnoticed by individuals. From facial recognition to automated assistants, artificial intelligence technology not only helps process vast amounts of data and conduct menial tasks, but it also has the potential to affect individual and collective decision making and actions. How should civil society engage with the challenges and opportunities created by Artificial Intelligence (AI)?

Civil society – a group of actors that typically includes academia, foundations, the media, NGOs, faith-based groups, and labour unions, among others,[i] is essential for the democratic development of any society. Not only does civil society play the role of a "watchdog" vis-a-vis the actions of governments and the private sector, but it helps deliver services to underserved populations by providing platforms for people to express themselves, and promoting human rights.[ii]

In recent years, AI, especially AI powered by vast amounts of data made available by digital transformation, has emerged as a new phenomenon with deep repercussions for the economy, the world of work, social relations, democracy, ethics, and human rights**.**

In this context, civil society has the responsibility to become involved in processes that are shaping the development of AI to ensure that human rights are upheld, to help democratize AI, and to highlight opportunities and challenges.

The first step towards becoming more engaged is to move beyond the stereotypes about AI that exist in popular culture, most of which come from science fiction. We have not yet reached Artificial General Intelligence (AGI), a type of AI that would meaningfully surpass human intelligence as it relates to emotion, intuition, and contextual decision making.[iii] A way to do this is to focus on current definitions of AI, which, despite changing constantly, provide a common ground for conversation.

What is Artificial Intelligence?

AI is defined as "the theory and development of computer systems able to perform tasks normally requiring human intelligence, such as visual perception, speech recognition, decision-making, and translation between languages".[iv] AI is especially useful in helping make sense of the data by sorting it, identifying patterns, and using that knowledge to make predictions about future patterns and to make decisions.[v] To accomplish these objectives, AI utilizes *machine learning*, a process that enables computers to learn using data about previous experiences, and *deep learning*, a type of machine learning that enables computers to learn without the need for external guidance.[vi]

The Impact of AI

AI is increasingly becoming more central in a wide range of fields. Despite its many advances, obstacles remain in its development and data. It is useful to think about areas where AI is having an impact now, including:

- **Financial and insurance services**: As AI gains prominence in facilitating data processing, these institutions may become more efficient and create new wealth. But it is likely that some workers may be displaced and that AI will become central in decision-making processes, creating ethical and social justice issues;
- **Manufacturing, agriculture, and work**: As humans develop machines that are more adept at carrying out repetitive or menial tasks, as well as at fully automating processes such as irrigation, productivity may rise, but workers may become displaced as a result;

- **Governance and policy processes**: AI enables governments to derive valuable insights from the vast amounts of data about society they are already collecting, and use these for policy-making and governance purposes. However, issues around the quality, reliability, and biases embedded in AI algorithms and resulting data raise significant ethical, human rights, and social justice issues. These biases may result in the exclusion of minority or marginalized groups from policy-making and implementation.
- **Sustainable development**: AI has great potential to help the world meet the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. An example is the use of AI-powered object detection to aid the visually impaired, which not only promotes well-being (SDG3) but also assists in education (SDG4), economic growth (SDG8) and reduced inequalities (SDG10). Although AI is better positioned to help meet some goals more than others, several questions about data availability and funding remain unanswered.[vii]
- **Geopolitics**: Several developed countries are investing heavily in AI, often using a combination of public and private funding. These include the US and China, followed by European and Asian countries. Meanwhile, many developing countries, especially those in Africa, are falling behind.[viii] The risk of a new type of digital divide – an AI divide – between developed and developing countries is significant.

All of these changes raise significant human rights, ethical, and social justice questions:

Concerning Human Rights:
- How do we ensure that the right to privacy is upheld, given the vast amounts of data being collected?
- How do we ensure that the right to freedom of expression and access to information is upheld given the ways in which AI-based tools such as text generators can be used to misinform the public and index information in complex ways?
- How do we ensure that the rights to freedom of assembly and association are respected given the increased surveillance capabilities created by AI?

- Given the vast disparity in the application of human rights across the world, how do we promote a global commitment to human rights in an age marked by AI?
- Is it possible to embed human rights into the algorithms and AI tools processing data? Is it possible to "translate" human rights into computer code?
- These issues are explored in more depth in the 2018 report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression.

- **Concerning ethics:**
  - How do we deal with biases embedded in AI algorithms and data?
  - How do we deal with the social effects of biases created by AI?
  - How do we ensure that AI algorithms, including neural networks and their "black box" algorithmic decisions, are made more transparent so that everyone can understand them?
  - How do we deal with AI-powered decision making? How do we ensure that decision making involving AI is a useful complement to human decision making? How do we ensure that humans always have the "final say" in major decisions made by AI? And how do we decide which of those major decisions warrant further oversight by humans?
  - What might be the intended social and environmental consequences of AI?

- **Concerning social justice:**
  - Once data is collected from everyday citizens and that data is fed to AI systems, who owns that data and the outputs stemming from AI processes? How do we ensure that people have control over their own data? How do we guarantee that the monetization of personal data is democratized?
  - How do we ensure that AI is used to promote the social good instead of it being used only for private and state gain?
  - How do we democratize AI? What knowledge protection regimes do we need to ensure that everyone can benefit fairly from this valuable

new knowledge? What role should citizens have in the governance of AI-related systems and technologies?

- Who owns the infrastructure and the electromagnetic spectre that enable AI-based systems? If infrastructure was built using public funds, how can we ensure everyday citizens, and not just private sector actors, benefit meaningfully from this infrastructure?

- How do we deal with the new digital divides between developed and developed countries, or even between wealthy and marginalized sectors of the same society, that are likely to be brought about by AI?

The role of civil society

As AI continues to embed itself into our lives, we need civil society to become more involved in helping to tackle these issues. The following are key ways for civil society actors to become involved:

- **Articulating an alternative narrative**: The current framework guiding the development of AI is shaped by states and the private sector, who view it primarily as a way to increase productivity, boost economic growth, and simplify service delivery. In this regard, civil society needs to work together to develop a new narrative about AI that is based on social justice, human rights, ethics, and solidarity. This new narrative must also articulate a clear explanation of how greater citizen participation in the development of AI will make it *better* and more beneficial to *all* actors, as opposed to it being a factor that slows AI development. The Just Net Coalition (JNC) is taking the lead on this subject by holding events at RightsCon and at the Internet Governance Forum.

- **Knowledge Sharing and Capacity Building**: Many civil society actors interested in digital rights and AI may not have the technical capacity to meaningfully participated in discussions or research about those topics. On the other hand, there may be some actors who have already developed that capacity. Based on a spirit of solidarity and joint learning, civil society should look for ways to dismantle silos in order to share knowledge and expertise, build capacity, and empower new actors to become involved.

The UK's [Charities Aid Foundation](#) and the [International Centre for Not-for-Profit Law](#) have a series of resources on the subject.

- **Becoming involved in country-level processes**: Many countries, such as Canada, France, India, and South Korea, have developed or are developing national AI strategies[ix]. In some cases, governments may solicit input from the public as part of their efforts to develop a strategy. These can be entry points for new civil society actors interested in digital rights and AI.

- **Funding**: Engaging in advocacy work, particularly on issues as technically complex as AI, takes a significant amount of time and resources. The donor and philanthropic community can play a more active role in enabling these efforts. Established civil society actors can play a role by helping to influence donors' agendas in support of civil society involvement in AI.

Ultimately, it will take a strong, transnational, well-funded, and knowledgeable movement to have a significant impact.

This No-Nonsense Guide was compiled in 2019 from a number of sources by Lorenzo Vargas, with input from Philip Lee, Sara Speicher, Tess Sison, and Amanda Soares and is published by the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC).

i https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/04/what-is-civil-society/
ii https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/9f29ee_5081f4b461b7497a94fb834e6664f941.pdf
https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/04/what-is-civil-society/
iii Diplo Foundation (2019). TERMINOLOGY, HISTORICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUND, AND TECHNOLOGICAL BASICS.. In Artificial Intelligence: Technology, Governance, and Policy Frameworks.
iv Marr B (2018) The key definitions of artificial intelligence (AI) that explain its importance. Forbes, 14 February. Avail
https://www.forbes.com/sites/bernardmarr/2018/02/14/the-key-definitions-of-artificial-intelligence-ai-that-explain-its-importance/#3b6263494f5d
v Diplo Foundation (2019). ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE: APPLICATION AND GEOPOLITICAL IMPACT. In Artificial Intelligence: Technology, Governance, and Policy Frameworks.
vi Diplo Foundation (2019). TERMINOLOGY, HISTORICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUND, AND TECHNOLOGICAL BASICS.. In Artificial Intelligence: Technology, Governance, and Policy Frameworks.
vii Michael Chui, Martin Harrysson, James Manyika, Roger Roberts, Rita Chung, Pieter Nel, and Ashley van Heteren, 2018. Applying artificial intelligence for social good. McKinsey Global Institute
viii Richard Stirling, Hannah Miller and Emma Martinho-Truswell, 2017 GOVERNMENT AI READINESS INDEX 2017. Oxford Insights.
ix https://medium.com/politics-ai/an-overview-of-national-ai-strategies-2a70ec6edfd

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