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AI+Ethics: towards a Digital Society

The release of Atos' Digital Vision for Artificial Intelligence (AI) in 2018 represented an important step in our commitment to helping shape the debate on the power and social impact of this exciting technology.

It also encouraged us all to look at AI from a different and equally important angle: one that asks not only what AI can do, but also what it should do. This is the mission of Atos' ongoing work in this space.

It is an undisputable fact that digital technology carries with it enormous power to transform every aspect of people's lives. Over the past 20 years or so, we transitioned swiftly into hyper-connected ways of living which are now so ubiquitous as to become almost invisible. Artificial Intelligence may be self-apparent in digital personal assistants — Echo, Alexa and Siri fit smoothly into an archetype of AI that stretches back to HAL 9000[1] and beyond — but its reach stretches much further, from the algorithms behind search engines and travel planners to prescriptive maintenance that helps keep critical national infrastructure safe and operational.

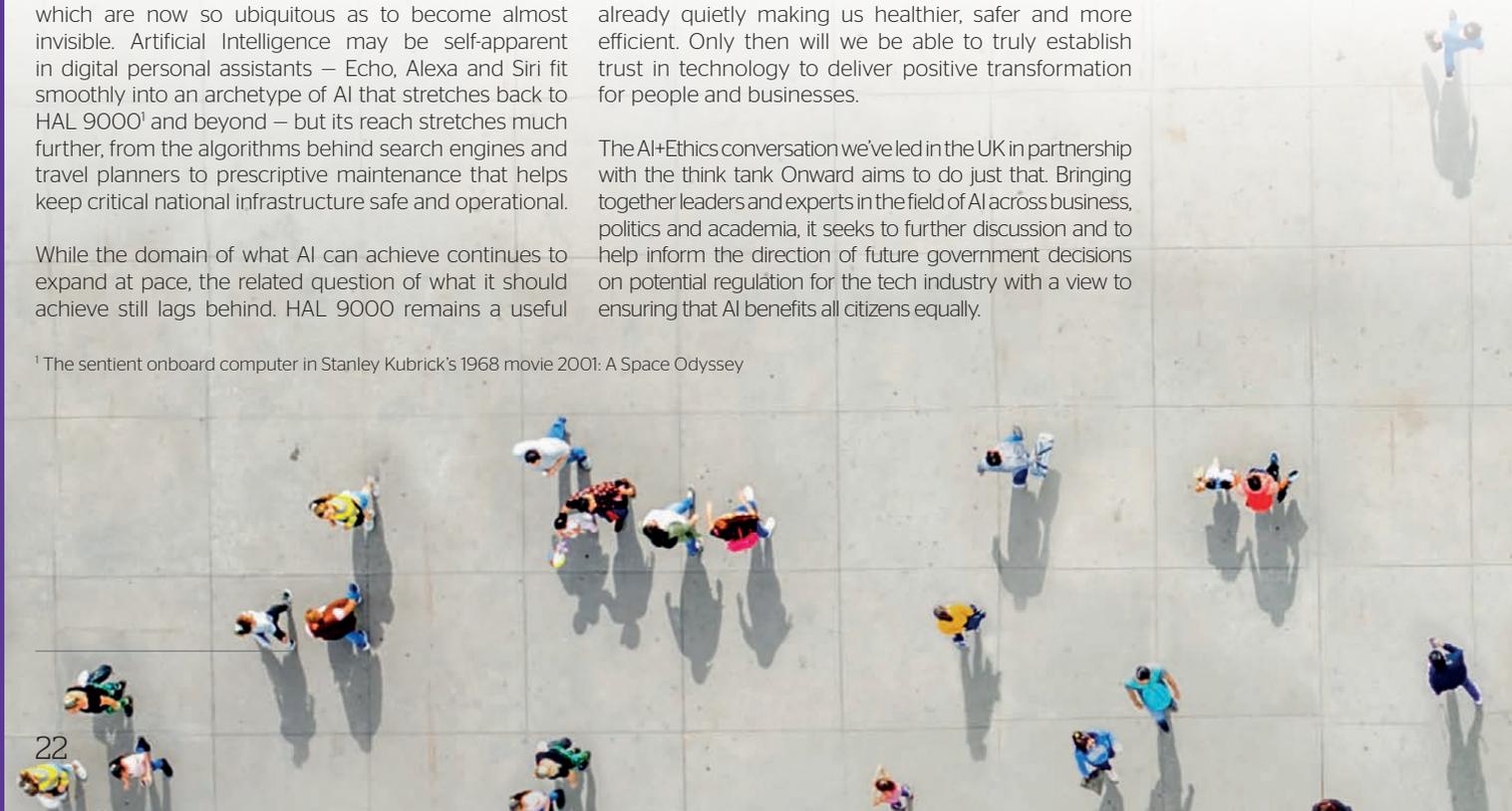While the domain of what AI can achieve continues to expand at pace, the related question of what it should achieve still lags behind. HAL 9000 remains a useful symbol for our deeply-set fears — an all-powerful, all-knowing and frighteningly emotionless entity that, when met with unforeseen circumstances, turns its logical brain against the humanity it was designed to serve.
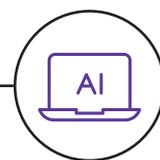
Although this form of AI does not exist in reality, a frank public debate must still take place on both the promise and the challenges surrounding AI — not the one that hijacks interstellar spaceships, rather the one that is already quietly making us healthier, safer and more efficient. Only then will we be able to truly establish trust in technology to deliver positive transformation for people and businesses.

The AI+Ethics conversation we've led in the UK in partnership with the think tank Onward aims to do just that. Bringing together leaders and experts in the field of AI across business, politics and academia, it seeks to further discussion and to help inform the direction of future government decisions on potential regulation for the tech industry with a view to ensuring that AI benefits all citizens equally.

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[1] The sentient onboard computer in Stanley Kubrick's 1968 movie 2001: A Space Odyssey

In the short time since we launched this programme in 2019, we have already organised four high-profile roundtables — two of them in the UK Parliament with several MPs in attendance — and have recently published a paper[2] outlining core principles to guide future technological and policy developments. For a peek at the direction the debate is going in, look no further than the titles of our recent roundtables: 'AI: How does it make lives better?', 'Trusting AI', 'Sharing the benefits of the technological revolution' and 'AI: Could we? Should we?'

In 2020 and beyond, we will be taking the debate further, harnessing the collective thought power of our AI+Ethics Network. This comprises the experts, practitioners and opinion formers who have taken part in our conversations in recent months together with new voices at the cutting edge of the debate. Everything we examine will continue to build on the principle that to explain AI through the lens of ethics means not only to create awareness and promote its

benefits to politicians and wider society, but also to explore what governance might be required to resolve potential risks and issues. If this body of work can ultimately help government and industry be better informed and therefore improve the choices they make, together we can contribute towards turning this powerful new technology into a catalyst for positive social change.

There is hardly any doubt that AI will continue to evolve at a blazing pace – even as I write, digital media is breaking the news that AI now outperforms human experts in medical diagnosis[3]. This is yet another reminder of why a positive debate on AI and Ethics is so necessary. Against a backdrop of such rapid change, the AI+Ethics Network will provide a forum to test and challenge ideas, moving us closer to a fully Digital Society where the benefits of AI can be felt by all and HAL 9000 continues to drift away into deep space, safely locked away in the world of science fiction.

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[2] https://atos.net/en-gb/united-kingdom/artificial-intelligence-and-ethics-report
[3] https://www.ft.com/content/3b64fa26-28e9-11ea-9a4f-963f0ec7e134