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Data ethics and global cultural differences

Artificial intelligence (AI) and the use of data have the potential to provide effective solutions to many of our global challenges. But tech also raises important questions, and we need effective guidelines to curb the risks to privacy, aspects of our daily lives and to society and democratic institutions.

In order to develop global principles which are acceptable across different cultures and traditions, policymakers should base their efforts on the universally accepted framework of international human rights law.

AI is fundamentally changing the game, and how to govern these emerging powers raises important questions and risks to fundamental rights, to which we need to develop general and global answers. We also need to understand how AI and tech is perceived in different cultural and social settings – and how AI impacts these. Big questions such as how bias impacts social fabric, context and mobility – or just the general cultural impact of the fact that algorithms and tech are developed in an English language context.

Data and technology are global in nature and need global standards for the responsible management of data and especially how to govern our dealings with Artificial Intelligence.

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Towards globally accepted ethical principles

Two recent studies are interesting to understand some aspects of this ongoing development.

The Health Ethics and Policy Lab at ETH in Zurich recently examined the existing corpus of ethical codes on Artificial Intelligence. The analysis of 84 international documents provide an interesting list of globally accepted ethical principles. No single principle was present in all 84 documents, but transparency was present in 73. Other generally accepted principles included Justice and Fairness (68/84), Nonmaleficence (60/84), Responsibility (60/84) and Privacy (47/84).

The Swiss study also provides insight into the global geographical distribution of codes for responsible AI. So far, such codes are developed mainly in the more economically developed countries, with the US and the UK accounting for about a third of the ethical AI principles. 19 of the 84 documents were European. No African or South American countries were represented. The world of AI ethical guidelines is still asymmetrical.

It is one thing to adopt general codes; another is how we actually perceive and react to moral dilemmas. The Moral Machine online dilemma experiment developed by Media Lab at MIT in Boston illustrates this. The game was based on a number of variations of the classical trolley dilemma. It was available online and Media Lab collected data on how citizens would want autonomous cars to solve moral dilemmas in the context of unavoidable accidents – who dies?



Read more in two articles in Nature:

Moral Machine Experiment <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-018-0637-6>

Global Landscape of AI <https://www.nature.com/articles/s42256-019-0088-2>



The passengers or the pedestrians? Children, older people, law abiding or the unlawful? People from 233 countries took part in 40 million decisions. The experiment provides insight into individual preferences, but the MIT team also noted how geographical and cultural proximity allows groups of territories to converge on shared preferences for machine ethics, and it uncovered differences in the preferences between three main clusters; a Western, Eastern and Southern group of countries. People from individualistic cultures showed a tendency to spare the lives of the greater number of characters, and people from collectivistic cultures showed a weak preference for youth.

Both studies are helpful in understanding some of the challenges in developing globally accepted standards for responsible tech and AI.

This is important as we need to promote inclusive and global dialogue in the development of coherent and stringent answers to the many questions we are facing.

So, will it be difficult or impossible to reach global and comprehensive principles? Human rights laws can provide a natural and important global framework for our dealings with the issues of AI and tech. International human rights law is well developed and provides both a universally accepted framework for considering and redressing the impacts of artificial intelligence on individuals and societies, and a useful and natural basis for these efforts – more universal and well defined than the current state of ethics principles.