

Experts discuss how AI can be used for social good

Artificial intelligence (AI) technologies can bring a wide range of opportunities and benefits, but they also come with the risk of perpetuating biases and inequitable distribution of those benefits.

Much needs to be done to ensure AI development avoids such pitfalls and progresses in a way that delivers social good, said experts on a panel at the Asia Tech x Singapore event yesterday.

The role of ethics in AI systems has been “late to the game” and is often brought up only after problems surface and AI systems begin “automating inequality”, said Singapore University of Social Sciences ethics professor Jennifer Ang.

Instead of putting the technology first and asking what AI can do, ethics should be introduced at the beginning of the development process and not at the end as an afterthought, said Associate Professor Ang. “We need to first define what social good is, rather than what AI is capable of. Once we start with the idea of what social good is and we all agree to it, AI should develop to meet those goals rather than the other way around.”

Mr Royce Wee, head of global public policy at Alibaba Group in Singapore, highlighted the role of government regulations in defining the boundaries of AI use.

Alibaba is investing heavily in AI technology like chatbots, machine translation, user insights, marketing algorithms and logistics management. While this is partly a business necessity due to competition, Mr Wee said the e-commerce giant’s development of AI is also aimed at contributing to solutions for society’s problems.

He cited how Alibaba’s research and development facility created diagnostic tools during the Covid-19 pandemic to quickly and accurately determine if a patient was infected with the virus and

how severe the disease was likely to be, based on CT scans.

The other speakers on the virtual panel were Mr Omar Sultan Al Olama, Minister of State for Artificial Intelligence in the United Arab Emirates; Mr Raymund Enriquez Liboro, the commissioner and chairman of the National Privacy Commission in the Philippines; and Dr Wendell Wallach, the Emeritus Chair of Technology and Ethics Studies at the Yale Interdisciplinary Centre for Bioethics.

It was moderated by the National University of Singapore’s law dean, Professor Simon Chesterman.

Mr Omar spoke about the need for governments to balance the interests of the public with those of private, profit-seeking companies, which may deploy AI technology without understanding the ethical implications.

Mr Liboro said organisations that implement AI technology should try to anticipate and mitigate potential risks, and work with other stakeholders to resolve problems that do arise. They should also clearly define who holds responsibility for the operations and effects of AI systems and how any concerns can be raised, he said.

Dr Wallach warned that AI acts as an amplifier of other technological trends and can worsen disruptions and income inequality brought about by the digital economy. He said that measures such as the Group of Seven nations’ proposal for a global minimum corporate tax rate of at least 15 per cent are a good first step, but will require cooperation between governments.

The Asia Tech x Singapore event, organised by the Infocomm Media Development Authority for industry leaders, policymakers and experts to discuss leading technological trends, ends tomorrow.

Rei Kurohi