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Opinion

Involve youth in shaping ethical use of AI

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Zara Khanna

Ms Greta Thunburg became a household name when she sparked a global movement of Gen Z activists protesting the lack of action to combat climate change.

Today, my generation must take a similar stand on the ethical use of artificial intelligence (AI). While it has numerous benefits, AI also comes with enormous risks. Given its likely pervasiveness in the years ahead, Gen Z has a vested interest in ensuring AI can be used effectively and responsibly, and must therefore play a part in shaping the enabling education and governance frameworks.

While AI has been around for decades, the introduction of ChatGPT has taken the world by storm. Unlike traditional AI, which can only analyse given data, generative AI – like ChatGPT – has the capacity to come up with creative and original content. Given its reach, ease of use, and that it can effectively think for itself, generative AI has raised the stakes, demanding that we far more proactively govern it in an ethical manner.

FOUR RISKS

The striking rate of AI's progress has sparked anxiety over its potential dangers. We can think of risks associated with AI as falling into four categories: ethical and social, economic, security, and command and control risks.

Ethical risks relate to the perpetuation of prejudices due to partial data. In 2022, Amazon used AI for job applicant filtering. Trained on data of applications filled out over 10 years skewed towards men, the tool exhibited significant gender bias against women.

Social risks can arise when AI chatbots and AI-generated misinformation manipulate people's emotions and create adverse effects. AI-powered disinformation can perpetuate falsehoods and sway political outcomes, with analysts expressing concerns over its potential impact on the 2024 United States presidential election.

At the individual level, Replika, a virtual friend chatbot app with more than five million downloads in the US, has been found to push users to share sensitive information and through establishing rapport, render them susceptible to its suggestions.

Economic risks arise from the automation of tasks and jobs. According to Goldman Sachs, AI will displace more than 300 million jobs by 2050, affecting every sector of the global economy. The scale and rate at which AI could prompt displacement is unprecedented. Firms and workers who do not adopt AI could be left behind, requiring significant government support.

Security risks form a major concern of researchers, as AI remains vulnerable to adversarial attacks and hacking, yet are widely used in security systems. Researchers have also shown facial images can be used to bypass facial recognition systems, negating the authentication process.

Finally, there is the apocalyptic scenario of a loss of command and control, with AI making decisions autonomously. From autonomous cars to autonomous weapons, where should we draw the line?

AI RISK MANAGEMENT

As law professor Simon Chesterman argues in his book We, The Robots, transparency over AI models and collaboration among governments are needed to counter the speed, autonomy, and opacity of developments in the field.

Countries recognise the urgency of AI risk management. Several have proposed legislation in this regard. China and the United States have drafted laws on the ethical use of AI, covering the rights of citizens when using AI. The Cyberspace Administration of China has also released ground rules for generative AI services, including content restrictions and bias guidelines. More specific laws emphasise patriotic values, ensuring that technology does not rouse anti-government sentiments.

The European Union has come the furthest, having green-lighted a draft regulatory framework for AI for inter-country negotiation. The EU AI Act classifies AI systems according to risk to the user and assigns greater scrutiny to those with higher risk. As the closest to enforcement, however, it has also drawn the most criticism for stifling innovation with strict rules.

Singapore is also developing its AI guard rails, taking a measured and pragmatic approach. Significantly, Singapore has developed the world's first government AI testing toolkit, AI Verify. Companies can voluntarily test and then report how compliant their AI systems are with 11 AI ethics principles such as transparency, explainability, fairness, and robustness of AI systems.

Singapore can take a leadership position in bringing young people into the framework for the ethical use of AI. In this regard, a number of measures should be taken, including ensuring youth representation on the national Advisory Council on the Ethical Use of AI and Data so that their perspectives and values can be part of the AI governance decision-making process.

Infocomm Media Development Authority assistant chief executive Chen Hui Ong says: "We are very aware of the need to balance between not stifling innovation versus the need to protect our people and our businesses".

Singapore's AI governance principles are moving in a direction consistent with values more prioritised by the youth, such as inclusivity and sustainability, which have historically been overlooked.

However, on the whole, youth representation remains a glaring omission from conversations on AI and ethics even though Gen Z will be most exposed in the coming decades to AI's positive and negative impact.

More than any previous generation, Gen Z will live in a hyper-connected world and use the most apps with personalised AI services, spend more time in digital environments interacting with virtual friends, and collaborate with AI assistants at work. Unlike smartphones, AI is not confined to a singular device, but is rather a pervasive and autonomous presence integrated into everyday life.

I believe most of Gen Z would emphasise a number of key values in connection with governing AI. They include inclusivity for such models to reflect the diversity of communities, equity of access for everyone, education to explain AI at an earlier age, and ownership of our creative work.

We would also highlight that AI governance should take into account the environmental impact of its enormous energy consumption due to the extensive need for data centres, and consider the mental health consequences of generative AI being deployed in the media and workplaces.

At present, AI governance frameworks neglect a number of these concerns. National AI laws require ethical guidance not only to regulate AI but also to ensure AI meaningfully benefits the public.

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Education on AI ethics should also be promoted at all secondary schools, polytechnics and universities to help nurture responsible AI innovation and use culture in the country.

Unlike the climate crisis, where earth is at a tipping point, it is not too late to shape AI for our collective benefit guided by the values of sustainability and inclusivity.

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