IIC Singapore – TRPC Forum: The Humanity in AI
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Venue: Telenor Asia

Event Summary

Why is the discussion of ethics in AI important? Why now?

Artificial intelligence (AI) is a general purpose technology that has the potential to improve lives, but which can also be misused for nefarious purposes. And although AI technologies have existed for some time, they have become significantly more affordable and prevalent in everyday life today that the technology is now available for small businesses and startups which will need to begin incorporating/developing ethical guidelines at an earlier, rather than later stage. Balancing the aspirations to invest into AI and develop innovative and competitive advantages is the need to manage the risks. Recognizing this, governments in Singapore and the European Union have formed expert groups with multi-stakeholder representations on the matter and released guidelines to steer responsible and 'ethical' development of AI.
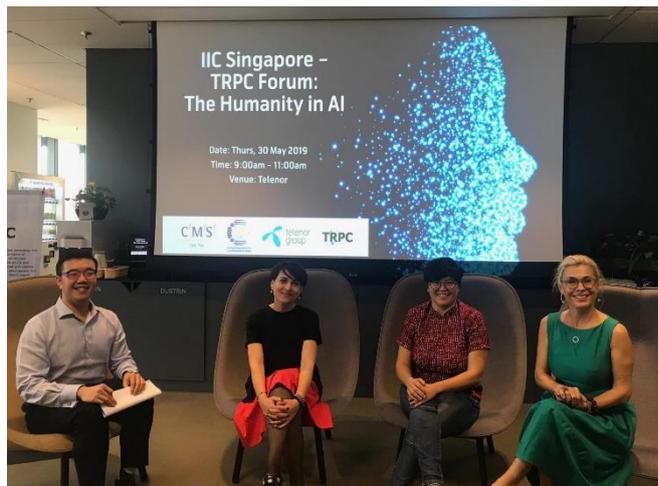
While the objectives and approach in the respective guidelines may appear similar, the actual definitions and parameters on what ethics represents can differ significantly. Ethics can be defined as a set of moral entitlements that guide behavior, and more than just the laws of a country. However ethics is also influenced by society and culture and represent a moving target. Even where principles such as fairness, transparency and explainability, and accountability can be universally agreed, interpretation can still differ widely. However what was recognized and agreed was that regulations on ethics should guide behavior around technology, rather than the technology itself, with a localized governance framework that can be practically enforced.

How then should businesses react to this moving target and uncertainty?

For organizations, especially those dealing with data, it is crucial that their moral codes are reviewed regularly. Often, organizations do not know what AI ethics are or how to work with legislation. It is critical that businesses big and small begin to figure out what makes up their moral codex. Key management should ask themselves if they would be comfortable being scrutinized by technology as much as consumers are – if not, take certain steps or exclude certain types of data. In fact, this could be possibly easier achieved in start-ups rather than in larger companies, without the legacy of older policies and guidelines, or boards and shareholders to manage. Ultimately though regardless of size, as ethics is a moving target, the best move for all organizations is to start getting involved in the debate and have discussions with developers, users, and customers. Data literacy levels on what and how data can impact oneself and others needs to continue to improve and ensure more ethical use of AI.

If data is crucial to AI, should data protection be at the heart of discussions on AI and ethics?

There are two important elements in AI: data and algorithms. Data protection frameworks are fundamental or foundational in how we first deal with data. Yet without data, the algorithm is useless, while likewise without the algorithm, the data has no AI application or use. Using data which is free of bias, or where the biasness has been recognized is important, but equally so is the algorithm. In our attempt to ensure that clean and curated data is used in machine learning, we should not neglect the algorithm and its effect in determining the outcome. It is often found that a model develops and reacts in a way that was not previously anticipated – resulting in an unexpected outcome. biasness is a part of society, what would happen if we were able to take biasness out of the equation? Would there be any unintended consequences?

What is the best way forward for AI and ethics?

AI has often been portrayed by the media in a negative light, instilling fear of its disruptive potential without being fully understood. As a general purpose technology, AIs can be applied and used in *all* industries, and often present an augmented capability to drive efficiencies and growth. Yet, if AIs are not fully understood, it would be hard to try and maximize the benefits while reducing the risks. It remains important that a balanced view is presented, where the benefits of AI, such as in the use of predicting and curbing the spread of disasters or mitigating environmental pollution, are highlighted as well.

Likewise the need to encourage digital literacy and transparency. We are already seeing this with the emerging MyData movement that supports the right of individuals to have control over the use of their data, as well as in Finland, where a general AI course has also been introduced in schools. There is an urgent need to democratize knowledge on AI, to both remove fear and build capacity to make informed decisions on the role AI will play in our future. Importantly, how we can develop the frameworks to improve knowledge, resources, and capacity to use technology to build a better future.

TRPC and IIC Singapore would like to express our appreciation to Telenor for hosting the forum which featured an attendance of over 40 participants.

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