



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing

Artificial Intelligence: The Consequences for Human Rights

Tuesday, May 22, 2018

3:00 – 4:30 PM

2255 Rayburn House Office Building

Remarks for the Record

I thank Co-Chair Hultgren for convening this Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission hearing on artificial intelligence and its consequences for human rights, and extend my appreciation to our distinguished witnesses for their participation today. Regrettably, I am unable to be present due to Rules Committee and floor scheduling.

We as human beings, with our intelligence and heart, have the capacity to do great good in the world. But we are also clearly capable of inflicting great harm – not only one-on-one, but on masses of people, quickly or over extended periods of time.

The same social systems we create to help us order our lives can sometimes also be used to harm entire classes of people – as we saw with slavery in the United States or apartheid in South Africa. Our rules and norms can serve to protect us, or be manipulated to penalize and discriminate against us.

In the end, the difference between one outcome or the other depends on human agency. Do we harm the person who has angered us or do we step back? Do we attack those who are different from us, or do we recognize and embrace their humanity? Each of us chooses every day to go in one direction or the other, as individuals and also as members and participants in the societies in which we live.

All of this was true before artificial intelligence appeared on the scene. But AI increases the stakes.

The technologies of artificial intelligence are one more example of the amazing capacity of human beings to learn about and transform our world. They are a testament to the incredible power of science, which has made possible so many improvements in the human condition.

But I am deeply worried that these technologies will be used – are already being used – in ways that make it easier for some human beings to make wrong decisions that harm others.

We already see the use of artificial intelligence technologies to facilitate social control. The Chinese are reportedly refining their capacity to use these technologies to surveil the Uyghur population in Xinjiang Province. Uyghurs are already so afraid that some outside of China have cut off contact with their relatives inside to protect them from retribution.

But of course the risks are not only with the Chinese. Here in the U.S. our own government is compiling biometric information on every person who crosses our borders. Cameras are everywhere. If I activate GPS on my phone, anyone can find me at any time.

Some of this is done in the name of security and some of it is about convenience. But in the end, already we are discovering that it is very hard to know the full extent of the data collected on us, much less to control what is done with it – or could be done with it, in the wrong hands. At a minimum, our rights to privacy, to freedom of expression and association, and to due process are all potentially at risk.

My second deep concern is with the use of artificial intelligence in weaponry – the development of “autonomous” weapons systems in which the machine or weapon or weapons program itself makes decisions regarding targets and kill zones.

In other words, killer robots.

These raise the grave human rights problem of who can be held accountable should a human rights crime be committed or civilians killed. They also raise the moral issue of taking a life based on a machine’s software parameters.

It is encouraging to see that there is growing attention and debate over this issue, including [discussion](#) of the need for a new treaty banning the procurement of autonomous weapons. But we have a long way to go to protect ourselves and others from this moral scourge.

In the end, there are two great risks with artificial intelligence technologies. First, they concentrate knowledge and thus power in the hands of those who employ them. In places like China, that power is essentially unconstrained. The use of these technologies by authoritarian governments for surveillance, or to control access to information, goods and services, will make it very, very hard to organize opposition to any injustice.

Second, these technologies dehumanize decision-making. They make it all too easy to forget the human consequences of our decisions and our actions. Even with artificial intelligence, machines are not capable of compassion or empathy.

So I welcome this discussion today. We are in urgent need of ideas and recommendations that allow us to benefit from the advances of science without surrendering our humanity or our rights.

Thank you.