

Addressing the ethical and social implications of Artificial Intelligence

Maria da Graça Carvalho explains how Parliament's new Special Committee on Artificial Intelligence will assist in the creation of a harmonised legal and ethical framework for AI.



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30 Sep 2020

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The term Artificial Intelligence (AI) has been around since the 1950s, although its implementation - following the initial euphoria - has been somewhat erratic.

Recent years, however, has seen an exponential growth in its technological deployment. Its implications are influencing every aspect of our society and promising breakthrough changes in many economic sectors. This has also increased debate within the European Institutions about whether or not AI will require a reinforced legislative framework.

Today, AI is ever-present in the EU agenda and a number of publications, guidelines and political statements seek to address its various dimensions. This growing political attention led to, in July, the creation of a Special Committee on Artificial intelligence in the European Parliament. I am very proud to be one of its full members.

The Committee will not deal with specific legislative acts; rather, its goal will be to assist in creating a harmonised legal and ethical framework that will enable us to address the many ethical, social and economic implications of AI. At the same time it will ensure that we do not hinder innovation, technological development and European competitiveness in the process.

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This implies finding the right balance between the boundaries that have to be determined in advance, the numerous incentives needed to boost our industrial AI capacity and the ethical aspects of the technology. This all has to happen while ensuring the adequate involvement of all stakeholders, from lawmakers to industry and citizens.

We all recognise the limitless potential of AI, but we have also been made aware of how it can be used, under certain circumstances, with ill intent, threatening our privacy, our freedom of choice, and even the quality of our democracies. Ethics are the cornerstone of AI's future.

We need to focus on the human dimension, so that AI will always be at the service of our citizens, and not vice versa. In order to achieve that, there are certain steps that need to be taken. One will be to make sure that everyone has a basic understanding of AI and its different uses. Another that a growing number of our citizens will become skilled in its use.

Programmes for educating and upskilling of citizens will be society's first line of defence against the abusive use of AI. Knowledge is power. At the same time, this transformation will have inevitable and disruptive impacts on the labour market, but this path will undoubtedly lead us to new opportunities.

Training and skills development will be key in this process. A particular attention must be given to the engagement of women in AI and related technologies. For cultural reasons, women have been less involved with technologies in general and, although we are starting to see signs of change, a lot remains to be done to eliminate the gender gap.

I have been doing a lot of work on this subject, in the form of reports, opinions and written questions, at the IMCO, ITRE and FEMM committees. My belief is that achieving this goal will be important, not just for women, but for society in general. The full potential of women's skills, knowledge and qualifications in the digital, AI and ICT fields will contribute to boosting the European economy.

In addition, AI needs the skills of both men and women in order to be as humane as possible.